SPIT BATHS

stories.

Greg Downs

Winner of the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction

VISIT…

SPIT BATHS

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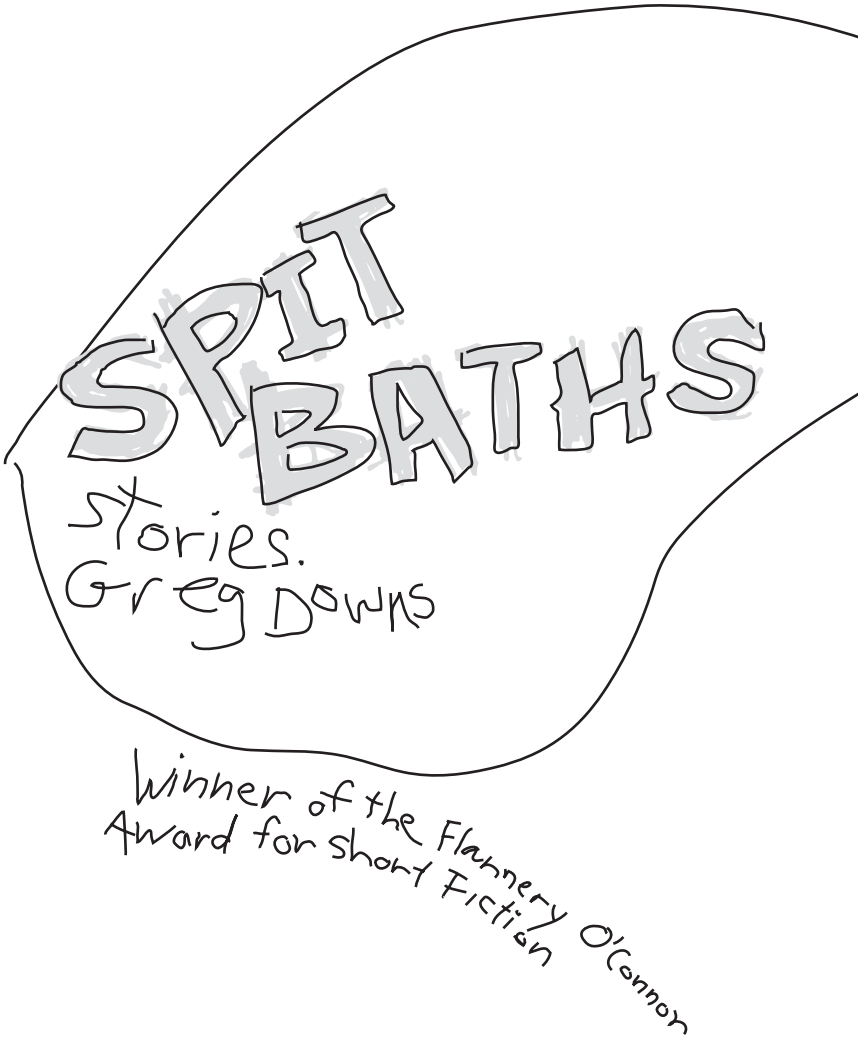

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To my mother, Ann Patterson Howard
a fighter

and to the memory of her mother, Dorothy Elizabeth Howard
who was a fighter, too

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Of course, none of this would have been possible without Diane. Tomorrow, I will cling to you. . . .

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SPIT BATHS

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Adam's Curse

IN JUNE, ALL THE WOMEN in my family made a pact to live without men. No votes, no summits, no negotiations; they simply exhaled the men like sighs from their houses. My mother's, Mee-Maw's, and Aunt Farrah's. I was nineteen, a college dropout living in my aunt's basement.

I sat with Uncle Harold on the porch, trading hits of spiced rum while the movers boxed his underwear. "You can't fight history," Uncle Harold said. "Who do you think invented circumcision?" My grandfather pushed an empty shopping cart around Kroger's day and night, covering his face with a box of Apple Jacks. My stepfather delivered gigantic fruit baskets. Citruses of extravagant shapes and colors, from countries I could not pronounce. He sat in his car, the cigarette smoke clouding his face. My mother neither

opened the baskets nor moved them. When they covered the front porch, she crawled through the windows. I worked at a broom factory across the river. The unmarried men there picked their noses with tar-stained fingers. Hopeless cases.

In July, the women considered my status, the exception they had granted me for my youth. I sat eleven feet beneath them in the basement, playing kung fu video games on a black-and-white television set, while they indicted me as a cigarette thief, a weak-wristed dishwasher, an excessive perspirer. The men played speed chess in the park, tabulating their scores on cardboard boxes. They wore loose overalls, coffee-stained undershirts. "Without competition, there's no hope," Uncle Harold said.

In August, my women fled the heat all the way up to Nova Scotia. Their postcard showed the three of them standing in yellow sundresses on the prow of a lobster boat called *Adam's Curse*. "Start packing!" my mother wrote. "They are artists of cruelty," Uncle Harold said. "They paint pain on broad canvasses." My grandfather babbled ceaselessly about the *Maiden of the Mist* at Niagara Falls. They were going downhill. They played recklessly, sacrificing queens for illusory advantages. The other chess players at the park would no longer shake their hands.

In September, when the women returned, I was summoned to the dining table. My grandmother dabbed tears with a paper napkin; my mother proclaimed yet again the triumph of science over sentiment. Aunt Farrah carried my tube socks down to the garage, where a checkout girl from Kroger's gripped the steering wheel of her black Chevy Impala. "You call *him* cute?" the checkout girl said. "No wonder his grandfather hides behind cereal boxes."

I stuffed my hands in my pockets as the Kroger's girl backed out of the garage. When I blinked my eyes against the bite of the

Impala's exhaust, I pictured my men on their park bench, picking their teeth with pawns, peeling grapefruits with blackened fingers. "Without regret, there's no future," Uncle Harold said. Behind me my mother and my grandmother and Aunt Farrah clinked teacups together, in celebration.

From the driveway's edge, the Impala's horn whined like a smacked child. I dove into the passenger seat before she pulled away. We were halfway across town, driving at excessive speed past the park where the men played chess, when I finally got a look at the Kroger's girl. Her fingers were as long as needles, her eyes as green as gas flames. Her face was a clock ticking down, an alarm that that I knew would one day ring.

Black Pork

ON TUESDAY, RUBY-ANNE kept Branch company during his grandfather's checkup. It meant missing softball practice, but her mother, Marie Claire, was the softball coach, and loved Big Pop, too, and didn't try to talk Ruby-Anne out of it. Branch and Ruby-Anne talked pitching while they waited in the car. When Big Pop walked out the door, they both went quiet. The old man weaved across the clinic parking lot, bracing his fingertips against the hoods, then settled into the passenger seat. Before he buckled up, Big Pop whispered in his grandson's ear.

"I want to taste black pork again," Big Pop said. "Congo cut. Nigger meat. I want to feel big." Big Pop's mouth slid down his grandson's ear and he kissed the boy deep on his neck, on the trail of hair the barber shaved every other Thursday. Branch nudged the

old man away. Then he reached down and squeezed his grandfather's hand.

"What you whispering, Big Pop?" Ruby-Anne asked. She sat in the backseat, working her needles through a baby sweater. The piece had just taken the shape of an arm, and she knitted steady, nodding her head as she counted stitches, only looking down when it was time to turn at the end of a row. She was fifteen years old.

Branch squeezed his grandfather's hand tighter, warning him. "Nothing," Branch said. "Big Pop ain't saying nothing."

"You telling him something about me, Big Pop?" she asked.

"Just the truth," Big Pop said. "Better not let a girl like you slip away. Not many can knit and throw a baseball, both."

Branch turned the ignition, steered the car onto 34, toward Faircloth.

"That doctor give you some kind of medicine?" Branch said. "You're talking crazy, Big Pop."

Ruby-Anne checked her needles, then looked up at the white men in the seat in front of her.

"He's worried about my feelings, Big Pop. He thinks he's protecting me."

"Protecting hisself," Big Pop said. "You're the one who's the kid, Branch."

"I know what I am," Branch said. "And I know what she is. I know both of those things."

Three times in the week previous, Branch found notes in his mailbox. They were written on the stationery of a local college. The notes all said about the same thing. "Those days are history, asshole. No more white men chasing down black girls just because they can. There are laws now, and there are people who will make sure

those laws get enforced, until assholes and statutory rapists like you are *history*."

Three letters, on the cream-colored college stationery, written in purple ink with a woman's careful hand. No signature, but he knew they were from Lanie Laurence, the woman professor who'd bought the Meyers place up the hill. She was the owner, also, of the two old sharecropper cabins down the hill, the one that Big Pop and Branch rented, and the one that Ruby-Anne and her mother lived in. Nobody knew where the professor was from, so people said she was from New York City. Branch didn't touch Ruby-Anne, of course, but not because of the notes. He had other reasons for that.

Six months ago, when he came home from that one awful season in Davenport, Iowa, Branch was ashamed to face Big Pop and Marie Claire. He drove up to the cabins, and he sat in the driver's seat of his Ford Tempo, listening to the Mellencamp song on the radio. Marie Claire was over to his left, drinking lemonade at the picnic table behind her cabin. And Big Pop was to his right, chewing on a sandwich. After a while, Marie Claire got up from her table and walked over to Big Pop and gave him her hand. Big Pop took it, and the old white man and the middle-aged black woman walked over together toward him. Branch rolled down his window. He knew he had disappointed them twice, by not being a better pitcher than he was, and by not taking the team's offer to bring him back the next year. They had hopes for him, Marie Claire and Big Pop, both, and Branch had broken those hopes. Big Pop surprised him by leaning through the window and kissing him on the lips, something Big Pop had never done before.

"It's my boy," Big Pop said. "Couldn't stay away from home cooking for long."

"Look at you," Marie Claire said. "You grew up and got sad on us." She kissed him on the cheek, then led Big Pop back to his picnic table. Branch was so relieved that he didn't even notice how slowly Big Pop was walking. He got his suitcases from the trunk.

Ruby-Anne pretended to be mad at him.

"And who are you supposed to be?" she said. Ruby-Anne was taller, up to his chin. That was the first thing that told him she had changed.

"Well, I ain't Nolan Ryan."

"Don't you leave me no more. I don't like it one bit."

Branch used to hug her every night, before bed, the way a brother would. But now he was frightened to touch her. He looked down at the glove in her hand.

"Want to throw?" he said.

"Think you can still catch me? After all that time sitting on the bench in Davenport, Iowa?" Ruby-Anne could throw much harder now than she could four months earlier. That was another difference.

On Tuesday, Big Pop wanted to go out to eat after his doctor visit. But he couldn't keep anything down, just brushed his food across the plate. The waitress wrapped his steak in aluminum foil.

"You don't usually leave anything for the dogs, Mr. Russell," she said.

Big Pop looked toward the women's bathroom. Ruby-Anne was in there, washing up.

"I ain't hungry for this white food," he whispered. "I'm hungry for black pork. Nigger meat."

The waitress dropped the bag on the table. "I don't think that's on our menu, Mr. Russell."

Branch gave money to the waitress, so she'd go away.

"Stop that big talking," Branch said. "Before you hurt somebody, saying something you don't mean."

Big Pop drew his tongue across his lip. "But I want to feel big," he said.

The whole drive home, Branch talked, to keep Big Pop quiet, to protect Ruby-Anne from hearing something she shouldn't have to hear.

Big Pop was born across the river, in Kentucky. His parents died from the flu when he was four years old, both of them, and his uncle and aunt took him in. They lived in a few cabins on one side of a tobacco plantation, with some other white hands. The colored lived on the other side of the fields. Though they all worked the same damn tobacco plants, they kept to themselves, the white and the colored. One spring when Big Pop was a teenager, his uncle got tired of feeding him, drove him across the river to Faircloth, Ohio, and got him a job sweeping floors at the sporting goods store, the same one where Branch worked now, selling equipment to high school teams.

That wasn't the story Big Pop told, though. This was the story he told. The Christmas he was fifteen, just before his family sent him to Ohio, the colored families dug a big pit and dropped rocks in boiling water and lifted them out with tongs and carried them to the hole. Then they piled wood and set it to fire. When it was burned to ashes, the colored laid the pork shoulder on top and then they buried the whole mess, two of the men standing guard over it, and the smoke rising up through the fissures in the ground. When they dug it up, late the next day, a woman and a girl carried over a plateful to Big Pop's uncle.

"For the holiday," the mother said. Big Pop pinched off a piece

and stuck it in his mouth. The grease coated his tongue. It was like eating oil and smoke.

But his uncle gave the colored the back of his hand, told them to stay where they belonged. "We folks can provide for ourselves," he said.

As the woman and her daughter walked away, Big Pop's uncle said, "Damn niggers. Let their toe in, and they'll stick their whole damn foot. But you didn't say no, did you, boy?"

The taste in his mouth, the sight of them walking away, those were things Big Pop talked about. But only late at night, after Ruby-Anne had gone back to her mother's house.

Tuesday evening, Ruby-Anne came over to watch the television with Big Pop. Big Pop was just like ever, whistling at the pretty girls on the television, sassing back to the "boss men." But Branch couldn't relax around his grandfather. He got his glove, went outside to the backstop he and Big Pop put up years ago. They painted the strike zone with yellow road paint they got from the state highway crew. Nailed sponges to the front, in the strike zone, so a strike sounded different than a ball. Branch took a ball from the bucket, threw it, waited for the wood to tell him what he had thrown. A strike made a soft thump.

Marie Claire carried her pitcher of lemonade out from her house to the picnic table. "Kick high," she hollered, her voice hoarse from screaming. After a few weeks of softball, she'd be reduced to whispering. Even in the dark, Marie Claire could tell when Branch threw lazy. He went over, sat down across the table from her. Marie Claire poured lemonade into the glass she brought out for him. "It's strong tonight," she said. "Had to be, the way those damn fool girls practiced."

The lemonade was spiked, always had been, though Branch did

not know it when he was in high school. Marie Claire liked to talk about her people, who worked the shipyards in Chester, Pennsylvania. She went through the college here on softball scholarship and then she got pregnant with Ruby-Anne and took a job coaching softball at Faircloth High, and she had never left. "Which is all right," she'd say. "Cause Chester, Pennsylvania, sounds better in pictures than it does in living color. I'll tell you that."

"Season starts Saturday," Branch said.

"Not that we're ready for it." Marie Claire tapped a cigarette from her pack and lit it. "Least I got Ruby-Anne. She'll be ready. Those other girls nothing but fools. Children."

"Ruby-Anne's arm is livelier than a fucking firecracker," Branch said. "She's going to make them little high school girls look stupid."

"A fucking firecracker." She smiled around her cigarette. "Didn't talk that way before you went to Davenport, Iowa."

Liquor, yes, but she wouldn't let him touch her cigarettes.

"It was Ruby-Anne's father got me started, and look now, he ain't around but the Marlboros still are." She puffed, the red ring at the tip flickering and then quieting down.

"He was a fast-foot man. In your door and then out the window. He probably don't even smoke Marlboros no more. He probably isn't even faithful to his habits." She poured Branch another glass of lemonade. Before, in high school, she used to lecture him at night, but now she talked story to him, like he was her friend.

"Me," she said. "I've always been a faithful one. Fall in love once and stick with it." She stubbed out her cigarette on the wooden table. "And Ruby-Anne's the same way. Any fool can see that."

The lemonade caught deep in Branch's throat and started him coughing. Marie Claire slapped him on the back. Ruby-Anne came out of Big Pop's house to check on the noise.

"He need mouth to mouth?" she said.

"I know you need to give it to him." Marie Claire slapped Branch's wrist. "Look, you're making him blush, and you just a little girl."

Ruby-Anne went back inside Big Pop's house to watch the television. Branch stayed outside with Marie Claire. The kids passed back and forth between the two homes all the time, but Big Pop and Marie Claire only went inside each other's house twice a year, to Marie Claire's at Thanksgiving and to Big Pop's at Christmas.

On Wednesday, Marie Claire kicked the varsity out of practice and hollered at the jayvee, who at least would listen. Ruby-Anne called Branch at the sporting goods store, and he drove over to pick her up as soon as he finished. The other varsity girls were standing on the sidewalk, giggling. "That's Ruby-Anne's boyfriend," one of the girls said. "He's got a car."

Big Pop was asleep, so the two of them were alone, unless that professor Laurence was staring down the hill at them. From the second-floor windows, that professor could probably see the whole compound, their little lives opened before her like one of her books.

Ruby-Anne waited for him to open the passenger door. That was something else that had changed when he came back from Davenport, Iowa. She expected to be treated like a lady.

"Let's go for a stroll," Branch said. Being alone with her made him nervous, these days.

They walked the old furrow, left over from the corn days. Now that the lady professor didn't farm it, the land was mostly heather and ragweed. They went far into the fields, all the way to Red Creek. There, Branch stepped onto the flat rock in the middle of the stream and turned back and gave her his hand. Ruby-Anne didn't let go, even when they reached the other side. Her fingers

were strong, from all the baseball they had thrown. In season, he made her stick to softball, since there wasn't any baseball for girls, once you got to high school.

"You worried about falling?" he said. "That why you holding so tight?"

"Maybe I already fell."

"You shouldn't talk like that."

"You should let me kiss you, Branch. It wouldn't hurt you none. You should want to make other people happy."

"I ain't going to make you happy. I'm going make you sad, Ruby-Anne."

"You're just making yourself sad right now, Branch. Not letting yourself kiss this black woman who loves you."

"If you don't shut up, I'm going to shake your hand loose."

"I'll just catch hold again. You know I got strong fingers."

But she stopped talking about kissing him. On their way back, Ruby-Anne described the game coming up against Consolidated. The way she would pitch the first inning.

"Think, don't just throw," he said. "That was my problem. I was an arm, not a head."

"You ain't going to have no problems, Branch." She lifted his hand to her lips and kissed his index finger once, quickly.

"Be careful but don't walk nobody. Throw strikes but not too good ones."

He let her hold his hand the rest of the way home. The truth was he didn't mind holding hands with her. The truth was he didn't mind anything he did with her. It was just that she had become pushy, these last few months, and he feared the next things coming, when they might do something he couldn't never take back. He had come home from that Iowa baseball team because he liked his old life,

not so he could mess it up. Didn't he have enough to worry about, with Big Pop acting so strange? As they came out from the fields, Branch shook her hand free, and this time she didn't fight him.

Wednesday night, Branch found a new note in the mailbox. An article about Neanderthals copied from the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. The professor Lanie Laurence had written two sentences across the bottom with her purple pen.

"See any creatures like that anymore? They're *extinct*, and you will be too if you don't keep your hands off that poor girl."

The picture showed a hunched-over man with a scraggly beard. Branch had seen a hundred men who looked like that in the stands of his baseball games, here and in Iowa, both. He threw the paper into the trash can.

Big Pop could snore like a champ. He'd lie on his back, twitching his head as the breath tore through his throat and the back of his mouth. Sometimes it got so bad that Branch would walk out to the couch, where Big Pop slept, and punch him on the arm to quiet him. Big Pop never got angry. He'd rub his arm and apologize. "I'll stop it, I promise." Of course he didn't. But Branch was used to it. Most days it didn't bother him.

Late Wednesday night, Branch woke up to silence. No snoring. He jumped out of bed naked and ran to the living room. He was scared without admitting why. But the couch was empty, the blankets in a heap on the carpet. The bathroom was empty, and the kitchen, too. He put on his shorts and walked outside.

"Big Pop?" The night was dark and he walked to the edge of the yard, up past the pitcher's mound, and he called again. Marie Claire came out from her house.

"Is Big Pop over with you?" Branch asked.

"Course he isn't."

"Ruby-Anne sleep?"

"She ain't on the telephone, and she ain't throwing softball, and she ain't chasing you, apparently, so sleep must be about the only option left." Marie Claire turned on the light. She was wearing her shimmering green sweat suit, the one she wore all day at school. "Let's go find him." Marie Claire zipped up her jacket.

They walked up the road toward the Meyers house, where Big Pop was standing on the porch, pounding on the door. Big Pop had been friendly with Mrs. Meyers, before she died, but he had not been up to the house since that professor Lanie Laurence bought it.

"I just want some black pork, Mrs. Meyers," he said. "Nigger meat. I remember you used to get some."

From inside, a woman's voice, Professor Laurence, called out to him. "You go away, right now. I won't have any man talking that way around me. You understand?"

Branch hollered his grandfather's name. Big Pop didn't seem surprised to see him.

"Sometimes Mrs. Meyers used to come back from her cousins in Kentucky and bring some with her," Big Pop said to Branch. "Mrs. Meyers would always save me a little, but now she won't give me none."

"Miss Marie Claire's with me," Branch said.

Big Pop slouched down, stuffed his hands into his pockets.

"Hi, there, honey," he said. Marie Claire slid her hand through his elbow, leading him to the steps.

"Why don't we take you home?" she said.

"Mrs. Turner?" It was Professor Laurence, from inside. "You alright out there? I'm already calling the police. There are laws against racism in this country."

"I don't need no protection from Russell here," Marie Claire said. "He's just confused."

"I'd call it bigotry." Professor Laurence opened the door. She was a thin, dark-haired woman with nervous eyes and the most enormous red-framed glasses. "Mrs. Turner, I need to tell the police about the way his grandson is chasing your daughter. I saw him kissing her down in the field today."

"I bet she was kissing him back," Marie Claire said. "If I know my daughter."

Marie Claire steered Big Pop down the steps. The old man had been thinking deeply, and finally he said, "That Mrs. Meyers ain't look the same, is she?"

"No, she doesn't," Marie Claire said.

"I didn't never kiss her," Branch said to Marie Claire. "I did hold her hand a little, cause she wanted to, but I didn't let her kiss me."

"You say it like it makes a difference," Marie Claire said. She led Big Pop down the steps, and they walked down the hillside to their cabins.

Thursday evening, Big Pop forked the roast beef into the trash. He hadn't eaten anything solid since his appointment at the clinic.

"You got to eat," Branch said. "You were the one said you wanted to be big."

"Whyn't you throw the ball again?" Big Pop said. "It'd make me feel a little lighter, watching you."

Branch took the plate from his grandfather and ran it under the faucet. He waited for the water to take the last of the gravy, and then he wiped the plate with the sponge.

"I'm a catcher, these days," Branch said. "It's Ruby-Anne who's got the games ahead of her."

"I been knowing that. I just know I want to see you again. You threw the ball so beautiful. Like it sprouted from your fingers."

"They didn't think so in Davenport, Iowa." His first two weeks there, Branch started three times. Lost all three. And then didn't pitch again for two months. No one would tell him why he was stuck on the bench. At the end of the season, they offered him another year, since he was a lefty, to see if he could fill out, grow into his arm. But he didn't want to go back. He wanted to be nowhere near that life again.

"They don't know shit in Davenport, Iowa," Big Pop said. "I know what I saw."

So Branch got the glove from the hook by the door and walked out to the mound. There was a bucket of balls in the kitchen, lumpy and scuffed from use. Why warm up? No reason to save his arm. He kicked his leg high, Dizzy Dean–style, the way Big Pop taught him, and then he let himself fall into the pitch, his toe diving toward the plate. The coaches at Davenport wanted to shorten his motion, take a little off the fastball, gain some on the control. Be a pitcher, not a thrower. But he loved to throw. He threw fastball, fastball, fastball. Who needed a curve in the dark? Who needed anything except the thump of the ball striking the sponges? Sometimes he missed low, just so he could hear the crack when it landed outside the strike zone, ball on wood.

"Look at my boy," Big Pop said. "Better than any symphony I ever heard."

Big Pop was sitting on the picnic table in back of their house, resting his hands on his belly. Across the driveway, Marie Claire was watching from her table. Ruby-Anne looked out from her window; she was talking on the telephone, nodding her head as she watched Branch throw. He leaned back again, hesitating the way Luis Tiant used to do in the Saturday afternoon games they showed on the television. He held himself, his knee tucked against his stomach, waiting until he felt like pitching. No umps here, no coaches, nothing but his world. Then he kicked his leg up high and began to fall forward. The ball thumped against the backstop.

"Beautiful," Big Pop said.

"Kick high," Marie Claire said. "An inch up there makes the whole difference."

"He looked good to me, honey."

"He did look good. I'm just saying he needs to look great. Cause he can, when he remembers."

Big Pop loving Branch the way he was, Marie Claire pushing him to be better. The same as it had been before, when he was still in high school and had the draft ahead of him and didn't know anything at all about Davenport, Iowa. After a while, Ruby-Anne came out, and she turned on the headlights of the cars so they could see, and squatted to catch for him.

"Unhittable is what that is," Ruby-Anne said.

"Oh, it's hittable," he said. "Those bastards from Cedar Rapids hit it like it was on a tee."

"I don't care nothing about Cedar Rapids," she said. "That is a first-class fastball."

After a few pitches, he got a softball, and he warmed her up slow. Tossing from close in, backing her off as her arm woke. Twenty, thirty minutes of soft tossing before he let her unleash. She had

the game in two days, and he didn't intend to interfere with that. She was the best softball pitcher anybody in the county had ever seen, dismissing batters like insults.

"Ain't nobody in Davenport or Cedar Rapids, either one, can hit that ball," he said. "I'll tell you that."

"That's cause softball's for girls."

"And you're a girl. Perfect fit."

Ruby-Anne whipped her arm and fired. The pitch rode a little high, and Branch was slow raising his glove. The ball tipped off the glove's edge and smacked him on the forehead. Actually, it didn't hurt; it just made him feel funny. Branch rolled backward onto the dirt and lay flat, the sky dark and open above him, until Ruby-Anne's face filled it. She knelt over him, running her fingers across his cheek.

"I killed him," she said. "I can't believe it."

He blinked his eyes. "No, you didn't. Not yet."

Ruby-Anne bent down to kiss him. Branch felt it without feeling like it was happening to him. He lay there and let it happen. She held her tongue on his lip, then she pulled away.

"I was just checking his breath," she said. "He ain't dead, yet."

"That goes for all of us," Marie Claire said, and Big Pop laughed. If they saw the kiss, they didn't say anything.

Friday morning, Branch found a folded sheet of paper under his windshield wiper. A pen-and-ink drawing of a bird and above it the words "Carolina Parakeet." The professor—he recognized the tight curves of her vowels—wrote beneath it, "They used to be everywhere, and they used to think they were beautiful, and now *they're gone*. Good-looking things go away, and so will you if you keep climbing on top of that girl. You're history."

Branch crumpled the paper into his pocket. He never thought of himself as good-looking, particularly. When he was pitching on the mound, maybe, but not just standing around in his T-shirt and his Wranglers. In regular clothes, he looked just like everybody else.

Friday night, Ruby-Anne tossed a few slow ones to Branch, just to calm herself. Then she said she needed to rest up for the next day. Branch placed her glove in the passenger seat of his car, so she wouldn't leave it behind in the morning. Game days, Ruby-Anne was so nervous she'd forget anything. Ruby-Anne followed him to the car. When he turned around, she was so close he could smell her, swampy from sweat. A year ago, her sweat didn't stink. She was changing.

"Give me a kiss for luck?" she said.

"I can't." He could feel Professor Laurence's crazy, nervous eyes reading him the way a psychic read a palm. Seeing his little acts and predicting his future. He hadn't told anybody about those notes.

"I know you want to."

"Once you can't, you don't even ask if you want to."

Ruby-Anne bit her bottom lip under her teeth. A year ago, before he left for Iowa, all her facial expressions had been big. Happiness and fury and hurt and curiosity and confusion. But now, she had a whole slew of stifled looks, masking her feelings. Like she had gone from comedy to drama in just those few months. During the months he was in Davenport, Iowa, Ruby-Anne wrote him a postcard almost every day. The cards didn't say much, but beneath her signature she'd draw a circle and write there the number of days left until he came home. Branch wrote her back, every Sunday, and he signed his letters "love," even though that wasn't exactly what he meant.

"I've got to have my luck," Ruby-Anne said. "So you're either going to have to kiss me now or in the morning, at the ball field, in front of everybody. If that's what you'd rather, that's your choice, though."

Her forehead was even with his chin, a final growth spurt that happened while he was gone, and that warned of what came next, her body swelling and thickening and curving out of its childhood. He bent down to kiss her on the forehead. She tilted her head into him, met his lips with her own.

"Good luck," he said.

"I don't need luck, you big dummy."

After Branch put Big Pop to bed, he sat down with Marie Claire at her picnic table. Behind her, the house was dark. Right now, Ruby-Anne was knitting in her room, waiting for the sleep to take her. Marie Claire poured a glass of lemonade for him. The first sip made him wince. Even stronger than usual.

"You nervous about tomorrow?" he said. Sometimes, Marie Claire walked the fields before games, blowing her whistle at the birds, trying to calm herself.

"It's not like she's going to lose," she said. "I mean, let's talk straight here. No girl can hit Ruby-Anne from forty-five feet. It's a travesty."

Branch drank from the lemonade. When he coughed, she reached over and slapped his back. Her polyester warm-up suit whistled as she swung her arm.

"Russell looks bad," she said. He coughed again. "You going to tell your mother?"

"Why?"

"It's her father."

"She'll find out someday," he said. "I wouldn't even know where to start looking, anymore."

"You got that Christmas card."

"Two years ago, now."

Marie Claire drummed her fingers against the picnic table. Branch watched them, and then, without knowing exactly why, he reached out and put his hand over hers. She slipped her hand over the top of his. Squeezed once and let go.

"When I was your age, I used to feel like the only thing that could happen to the world was for it to get better," she said. "Not the globe world, the one on the news, but my world. Like if I threw everything up in the air, it'd come down in the right order. In a perfect row. Better than it had been before. Then she happened." She pointed her thumb behind her, at the house, at Ruby-Anne's room.

"Now I sit out here, and I just thank God that things haven't got any worse." She lifted the cup and drank from it. "You know what I mean. Now, you do. A year ago, before Iowa, you didn't."

Branch was proud to be talked to this way, by Marie Claire. He didn't feel like she'd rejected him; he felt like she'd understood what he really wanted.

"The world can break," she said. "It can land on the ground and bust into a million pieces. Maybe all we can do is cradle it in our arms and try not to drop it. Is that so bad?"

"I don't think so."

She pointed her thumb behind her, again.

"And, Branch, what if that girl's love for you is as big as she thinks it is?"

"It's a crush, is all."

"She's a mix of girl and woman. The phone calls and the stupid torn blue jeans, those are girl things, right? And the knitting and

the serious way she takes to the pitching now, like it's a duty, those are woman things, aren't they? What if her love for you isn't a girl thing at all? What if it's the first rock of her woman, cracking through the little surface of her girl? What if it's the most real and lasting thing about her?"

"Then it's too bad she got it too young to do anything about."

"The hell with everybody else," she said.

Across the driveway, they heard a cough, a weak, giving sound, and then the back door opened, and Big Pop walked out. He was wearing an old porkpie hat, a white undershirt, and some blue gym shorts he must have found in Branch's dresser.

"You best go inside, Marie Claire. Big Pop's not right. He's talking crazy."

This time, she reached out to squeeze his hand. "Branch," she said. "You don't have to worry none about protecting me."

Big Pop walked slowly across the driveway, bracing his fingers on the hoods of their cars. "Oh, me," he said. "Oh, me."

"You alright?" Branch said. Big Pop didn't answer. He was staring at Marie Claire with an intensity that Branch had never seen in the old man. His mouth was raised to a pained smile, his eyes narrow and hard.

"I want black pork," he said. "I want to go back to Kentucky and get me some of that nigger meat."

"Big Pop," Branch said. "Don't say that to her. You love Miss Marie Claire."

"But I want to feel big." He coughed, and the force of it shook his cheeks and closed his eyes. He sat down at the picnic table.

"Russell?" Marie Claire said. "You alright in there? You recognize me? You recognize your boy here?"

"I'm so empty," he said. "My stomach is burning itself up looking for food."

"Shut up," Branch said. Marie Claire tugged at Branch's arm, pulling him into the kitchen. "I'm only shutting him up cause he'd want me to," Branch said. "You know that isn't who he is, not when he's in his right mind."

"It isn't who he is," Marie Claire said. "But he does mean it. Both things are true."

At the sink, Marie Claire poured some water from the tap and gave it to Branch to drink. "He showed me his doctor's letters," she said.

"I never saw no letters."

"He didn't want you to worry. Made me promise not to say. But I wouldn't be in no rush to get him to the hospital."

"Cause he's alright?"

Marie Claire shook her head, and he understood. He lifted himself onto the counter and sat there, staring at his toes. Branch had known all along, without admitting it.

"I want to do something for him," she said. "I want to make him feel big."

Branch tossed the remainder of the water into the sink.

"I want to fix him supper," she said. "I want to let his mouth lead him back home. I ain't got no pork. Just chicken. But it isn't the color of the meat he's worried about."

"I should do it. All he's done for me."

"What you should do is get Ruby-Anne out from the house. She hasn't ever seen me serve anybody before, and I don't want her to now."

"It's a game night."

"I thought you outgrew games," Marie Claire said. At the kitchen door, she turned back to him.

"If I thought it was something Ruby-Anne could control. If I thought I could just stamp it down and have it go away, like the

time she wanted to buy stickers, don't you think I'd already have done it? It's who she is, Branch."

In her bedroom, Ruby-Anne was knitting in the dark; he heard her counting the stitches.

"You can sit down at the foot, if you think I'm going to bite," she said. There had been times when he sat on her bed with her, but that had been a year ago, before Iowa.

"I want to get out of here a while. Just put on your shoes."

"The game's tomorrow."

"I want you to come with me. You don't want to come, that's your call."

Branch went into the kitchen. From the sink, he could see Big Pop at the picnic table, his elbows resting on the wood, his chin sitting on his hands, waiting like he had done a thousand times, at ballgames or in restaurants. Most of what people called parenting was just waiting, it seemed like, and waiting was something Big Pop could do as well as anybody. Was, in fact, something Big Pop could do much better than Branch's own parents. And now Big Pop was waiting for something else, something Branch could not understand. He closed his eyes.

Ruby-Anne's fingers slid over his belly, coming from behind him.

"It's just me," she said.

He turned, into her, felt her milky night breath, sour and weak. They were standing like that when Marie Claire walked into the kitchen. She was carrying a bag of frozen chicken legs.

"This fool wants me to go for a walk on a game night," Ruby-Anne said.

"And so do I," Marie Claire said. Ruby-Anne looked out the window, where Big Pop was sitting at the picnic table. She thought

a minute, then she took Branch's hand, led him to the front door, where Big Pop would not see them. They went into the fields behind the houses, moving through the dark and overgrown land. After a while, Ruby-Anne slid her fingers into his, and he didn't push her away. They were walking toward the creek, both of them, and they didn't need to say so aloud. When they came to the fence, he ducked under, held the barbs up for her. The water dallied beneath them, and they took off their shoes and let their feet cool. Ruby-Anne was the first one to lie down, looking at the top branches of the trees. Branch didn't lie down, though. He knew it was a silly difference, but he wanted to hold to it.

"Don't you feel like all this has already happened?" she said.

"All what?"

"Us," she said. "The things we're going to do. I just feel like I can't get too excited about whether we do them now or six months from now or a year. Because it's like in my head, it's already done, and I'm just waiting for our life here to catch up."

Branch could also see the future, but it wasn't the same one Ruby-Anne saw. There would be a note waiting for him. The college stationery, the purple ink, the tight vowels. What would that professor Lanie Laurence write? She had covered Neanderthals and Carolina parakeets, and maybe now she would describe the dinosaurs or the dodo birds or all the other things that had once lived and now were extinct. Or maybe this time she would call the police.

"You don't know what's coming. You're just a kid."

"Not when I look at things like that, I'm not. I'm an old, old woman." Ruby-Anne pulled him down to his back. Her fingers were strong, and he didn't feel like resisting, much. "Don't you ever feel like, on the mound, like you can see what you're going to do three

batters ahead. Before they're even up to the plate? Like it's done, already? Don't you feel that?"

"I did," he said. "When I pitched here. Out in Davenport, Iowa, I didn't know the next pitch from Manuel Noriega."

"I feel it," she said. "I feel like the future's already happened, and all I have to do is keep from messing it up."

"It's already done messed up," he said. "You'll go on off to college on your scholarship. You won't need no backstops or picnic tables or pitching partners. You'll be the best pitcher the Big Ten ever saw. You'll be spreading your wings wide as the sky. That's what I know."

"Then you'll come with me," she said.

"You can love something and still not be able to keep it alive. You don't know that yet." Branch held out his left arm, his pitching arm. It wasn't like the rest of his body. It was muscular, for one thing. And it had its own life, separate from his. It had been born and it grew and now it was dying, becoming just like the rest of him.

"Big Pop didn't want no boy better than you," Ruby-Anne said. "There isn't nothing more you could do for that man." Branch turned away from her. He had not been thinking of Big Pop, and that shamed him. "He made me promise to take care of you," she said. "He told me you'd need somebody to protect you."

She put her hand on his cheek, and he kissed her. At first he just wanted to keep her from saying anything, from hurting him any more. But then his own wants budded open inside of him, and he could feel the desire branching through his fingers, his toes, the back of his knees, the other places. A small popping sound slid from their lips. Ruby-Anne nodded, serious and old.

"And now every second's big as a basket." Ruby-Anne slid her

fingers softly over his cheeks. Too solemn, trying too hard to hold the moment in her hands, as if a moment could be held. Branch rode his left hand up her back, lifting her body to him. He bit her lip, rubbed his teeth against her chin. He kissed her shoulder and tasted something on his tongue, something strange and dark and salty. Sliding down her neck, he sucked hard on her skin, until dried sweat coated his tongue, until he made her gasp.

The Hired Man

GEORGE WASHINGTON WAS DEAD. Not exactly front page news. But the way George Washington died, that was what disturbed Tom Floyd. April 1778, Valley Forge, sailing on the Schuylkill with Hamilton and Laurens and von Steuben, George Washington stood at the bow, his surveyor's hand shading his eyes. When the hull struck a rock, George Washington fell forward, his arms waving like wings. Then he was gone, the water smoothing away the memory of his fall. Hamilton and Laurens and von Steuben shucked their shirts, dove into the river, but they could not find him. Upstream at Valley Forge, the soldiers hauled the shad nets in by hand, Greene and Ludwig tallied the loaves for the springtime feast, the fiddlers celebrated a winter's passing. And Washington tumbled southward, through Philadelphia, the Delaware Bay, the Atlantic Ocean. The

currents lifted his shoes, his fabled gold watch chain, his ivory teeth. His bare feet cartwheeled above his unwigged head; his body danced over the sharks.

Five months and twenty-three days before he discovered the truth about George Washington, Tom Floyd finally accepted retirement. His wife, Stephanie, took hers a year earlier, but then she liked being home. Bad students couldn't drive him out, not their unexcused absences, in-class chatter, chalked-up erasers, ill-intentioned caricatures, not even the bag of dog shit some dumb ass left on his desk three years ago. No, it took an expert, an administrator, to wear down Tom Floyd. Eleven guest speakers assigned by the district in one goddamn week. AIDS, drugs, gangs, guns, the procession of fear. After number nine, Tom Floyd signed the form he'd been keeping in his desk drawer. In the three minutes before number ten arrived, he carried the form to the office and gave it to the bookkeeper.

If Tom Floyd thought teaching was boring, he should have considered retirement. Even took up smoking again, until Stephanie made him quit. He wrote family histories and carried them out to the glider, where Stephanie read biographies in the afternoons. "This ain't another letter to the newspaper, is it?" she'd ask, teasing him. What she cared about was inside their fence line. Not strangers, not politics. After folding back the corner to mark her page, Stephanie would go to work on his history, scoring his loose sentences, his sloppy grammar. She asked questions. "Your great-aunt Jean really took a steamship through the Panama Canal? Grandpa Louis played exhibition basketball against the House of David All-Stars? Your people did some crazy shit."

"And I married you," he said.

"Take a rest before you make your corrections." Stephanie lifted her legs, opening a spot for him to sit. Stephanie laid her feet in his

lap, and he felt himself getting big. "Good grief," she said. "Leave it to a white man to get excited over a comma splice." She laughed. "Just wait till I finish this chapter, and I'll take you upstairs. Paul Robeson's father is fixing to die."

"If Mr. Robeson's death doesn't put you in the mood, nothing will," he said. But she liked order. Finish what's in the left hand, then worry about what's in the right.

For Christmas, Tom Floyd started Stephanie's family histories. No small present, finding information about dead black people. It required driving trips down past D.C. to Virginia, where her family had been kept before emancipation. He flipped through old plantation books until his eyes hummed. When he returned, Stephanie was reading by the sunroom window, waiting for him. A plate of cookies on the sill, covered by a white dish towel. He'd been smelling those cookies since Baltimore.

This trip, his third, Tom Floyd found the George Washington story in an 1827 plantation journal, between two long entries about the New Orleans cotton market. The woman who kept the journal owned Stephanie's great-great-grandfather, Immanuel Carter. Immanuel warned his mistress about the rumors, to keep his family out of any trouble that might be coming. The slaves up at Mount Vernon, Bushrod Washington's people, were telling the whole neighborhood about the two George Washingtons, hoping to shame old Bushrod into freeing them before he died. Loud talking could lead to trouble. But that was the only passage in the journal that mentioned the rumors, or Immanuel Carter.

Hamilton and Laurens and von Steuben tied off on the east bank of the Schuylkill. They kindled a fire to dry their trousers, covered their groins with their shirts, slept on the grass. Their dreams horrified them; they saw their bodies hanging from trees, their limbs

fed to hogs by the Hessians the British hired. Each man woke with thoughts of running to Philadelphia, of surrender, but no one would say it aloud. Hamilton lifted the trousers from the tree, still wet. The men put them on anyway. As they bucketed water onto the fire, a hired man walked from the woods into the rock-strewn field and began to break the ground with a hoe. He was tall, lacking teeth, and he hoed with silent fury. No farmers' curses, no hired man's laxity. It was the silence that inspired Hamilton's idea, and von Steuben's concurrence. Laurens needed convincing, but what were their options? Surrendering? Serving under that fool Gates? The hired man—they never asked his name—listened quietly. The colonists could not survive without a leader. If he would only say yes, he could give up the hiring-out life, own entire plantations in Virginia and hundreds of niggers to work them. Would he try it? The hired man, the new George, scratched his face. "I'll want teeth," he said. They did not ask if he left behind a family, a past, a life. The wind had died, and they began to row upstream. Laurens and Hamilton, being younger, took the first turn. When they were tired out, von Steuben took one oar. The new George picked up the other, then, remembering himself, gave it back to Hamilton.

Every October, Tom Floyd had presided over a weeklong mock trial of George Washington. Traitor/hero, racist/emancipator, aristocrat/democrat. Even the dumb students loved trials; they learned their legal phrases, with their cynicism, from the television. After the prosecutors pronounced George's guilt, the defense his innocence, Tom Floyd gave the verdict. "You're both right," he said. "He's guilty and innocent. Just like the country. It's not a single thing, good or bad. It's big enough to be worth arguing about, to be worth keeping together." But if Washington was small, a fake,

a hired man, what did that say about the country he founded? For the first time, Tom Floyd was glad he had retired. For all his limitations, he never once knowingly lied to them.

All the "Washington" signs on the Richmond-D.C. connector sickened Tom Floyd. False advertisements. Every April, he chaperoned a daylong trip to the capital; the students loved to watch the clouds scoot across the reflecting pool by the Washington Monument. Every year, it softened him, seeing these Philly kids toe up to the water's edge alongside the other history tourists, school groups from improbable places like West Des Moines, Muscle Shoals, East Lansing. Unlike by color, by accent, by pride, but here they were. Americans. Tom Floyd came late to patriotism; he'd entered teaching to avoid Vietnam. Over the years his students got darker, more skeptical, and he needed to remind them, and himself, that they were all in the same boat, that they weren't just floating free. Stephanie believed in a lonely world, and that drove her into herself, her biographies, her backyard, her clannish friends. But Tom Floyd still had his hope.

At the harbor tunnel, he passed his five to the toll taker, got three ones in return. The JFK tollbooths took a fresh five. So it wasn't until the Delaware Turnpike plaza that he looked at the dollar bills he'd received as change and saw the hired man grimacing at him. Fraud. He passed two fake Georges to the toll taker, and the gate lifted; the guilt bled from the Schuylkill to the Delaware to the Potomac to his fingertips. The third bill he dropped onto the passenger seat, on top of the journal pages the library staff copied for him. He had circled the name Immanuel with a black pen, so Stephanie could find it.

Near the Philly airport, he cut along Island Avenue, through the full and forgotten streets of Eastwick. Half the businesses in the

city advertised history: the line of women at the window of Liberty Steaks, the pigtailed girl dragging her father toward the Independence Water Ice stand, the delivery truck for George Washington Pretzels idling in front of Franklin Market. Tom Floyd wanted to tear the picture of George Washington off the truck. He wanted to attack the country, so that he could be roused to defend it. When the light changed, the car behind him honked, and he drove through. He'd save his words for Stephanie, who would argue back, who was tough enough to tire him out.

At home, Stephanie was knitting in the sunroom. As she finished each row, she looked out to the street. When she saw Tom Floyd, she raised her hand to wave. Then she put down the half-finished scarf, a blue one meant for him. Tom Floyd grabbed the papers and the dollar bill from the passenger seat.

"What's in your hand? You find something for me?" Stephanie stepped out onto the front step, holding a plate of cookies in her hands.

At the base of the steps was a latticed bin that covered their garbage cans. Tom Floyd stopped there, looked up at the sky. The streetlamps ruined most of it, but he could see a few stars, small hammer points. Some of the stars, he knew, had been dead a long time, thousands of years, and yet, from the Earth, they still sparkled. When the new George arrived at Mount Vernon, at the end of the war, his people lined the driveway. As he stepped down from the carriage, Martha waited for him. He gave her his arm, led her inside. If she noticed the new man beside her, she never said so.

"You coming up? Or I got to come get you?" Above him, Stephanie shook her bangs from her eyes. It felt good to be missed.

But her mood wouldn't last. Stephanie didn't care about George Washington. He would argue, throwing off his burden, and she

would seal her cookies in Tupperware, let her bangs shield her eyes, retreat behind her books. The cookies smelled the way her wool scarves felt on his skin. If the stars could burn falsely, why couldn't he?

"I didn't find nothing, baby," Tom Floyd said. "Just some trash." He crumpled the diary pages into his fist, tossed them into the garbage can. Then, just this once, just for his own soul, he threw the dollar bill in, too. As Tom Floyd walked up the steps to his wife, Stephanie set the plate on the windowsill, so that he could come close to her, so that she could kiss him.

Snack Cakes

THE BLARE OF THE CAR HORN WOKE ME. My mother slammed the front door, then walked into the kitchen. It was Saturday, two days after I'd finished my last eleventh-grade exam, nine hours after Lena and I did it in her basement at two in the morning while her parents slept, two days before I'd start my summer job at Pizza King. I took a long time combing my hair, tucking my shirt, before I sucked up the courage to walk into the kitchen, where she was waiting for me.

My mother was standing over the stove, sipping coffee from her old black cup, looking down at some things on the stove. Her car keys. Ten condoms in their white shells, lined up like clams on the stove's green surface. And one torn-open Trojan twenty-pack

box, which I had left half-empty under the driver's seat of her car when I returned home the night before. She sipped her coffee again.

"Ready for breakfast?" She said it in her dead way, just to make me squirm.

"Say something," I said. "Don't just look at me like that."

She gave me her "Did-I-make-you-angry?" smile, then asked me for the phone, which I stupidly was happy to give her, thinking it would take her eyes off me. Not thinking she would call Lena.

"Please don't," I said when I realized. But I didn't try to stop her.

"Lena," my mother said, all brightness now. "Honey? You awake? Guess what Charlie left in the car last night? Think, honey. It's something you would remember."

She tipped the phone away from her ear then so I could hear the sound Lena made. *Hunh-hunh-hunh-hunh*. Like the sound of somebody laughing and wheezing at the same time. Or crying. It was also like the sounds Lena made when we were doing it, when she couldn't cork up her moans but she couldn't let them out too loud, either.

"You're sick," I said. I grabbed the keys off the stove, brushing the condoms onto the floor, and hightailed it to her tan Buick Skylark. Leaving the phone behind, my mother trailed me. She still had her little "I-won" smile going, and when I backed out of the driveway, she raised her right hand and mockingly waved good-bye to me. She knew I'd be back. I leaned on the horn loud, so the neighbors would hear.

I followed I-40 to I-65, heading toward Lena's house, but I didn't stop there. If I had, we'd have just done it again, as a way of making ourselves feel better. I didn't want to do it with her right then.

I didn't want to have to hear that sound. I drove faster, past Portland and White House. It wasn't until I crossed the state line at Franklin, Kentucky, that I realized I was driving to my grandfather's house.

I hadn't seen my grandfather since his wedding three years earlier. His sixth wedding. At the party my mother kept talking to Celeste, my grandfather's fifth wife, who was there as a guest. Celeste seemed happy that my grandfather was getting married again, but the happier Celeste seemed, the angrier my mother got. Finally my mother pulled my grandfather away from Anne Marie, his new wife, and told him the way he went through women was "sick." My grandfather shrugged; there wasn't any use in arguing. Sick. That was what my mother called men she no longer wanted to see. My father. Her next two husbands. Her brother, my Uncle Charlie. During our little spat by the kitchen stove, I kept thinking my mother was going to call me "sick." I was glad she didn't. Once she said it, it was something she never took back.

My grandfather lived just off I-65 in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, where my mother and I had both been born. Even though my mother and I drove to E-town every month to see my grandmother, we hadn't visited my grandfather since his wedding. Honestly, I hadn't missed him. Not that he was an awful person. He was a good talker and a tremendous eater but not very interested in other people unless they were listening to him or bringing him food. Visiting him would make my mother mad.

My grandfather was sitting on a folding chair in his paved driveway, his huge thighs lipping over the edges of his seat. He was fanning himself with his gray porter's hat, and he didn't seem surprised to see me. The whole two hours of the drive north, I had

been constructing arguments. Blaming my mother. Blaming Lena. Excusing myself. I started blurting those things at him as soon as I got out of the car, to help calm myself down, but he interrupted me.

"There's a box or two on the porch you can help me carry," he said. Actually there were five boxes on the porch, each labeled with a woman's name written in permanent pen. While I studied the boxes, his sixth wife, Anne Marie, walked onto the porch and dropped a black suitcase there. Like all his wives, she was a man-shouldered, busty woman with black, curled hair and a white, smooth-skinned face.

"I'm his grandson Charlie," I said. I was close enough to smell her perfume.

"You can't help that, can you?"

"No, ma'am." I felt helpless. She lit a cigarette and walked back inside the house, closing the door. While I lugged the boxes, my grandfather detailed which box went in which car.

"Not in my mother's car," I said. "She doesn't know it's here."

"But there's all these boxes, Charlie," he said. "And my suitcase with my clothes. And my chair. A man's got to have a place to sit down, doesn't he? Be reasonable."

He was rubbing his belly as he talked. He was a great big man everywhere, but his stomach was bigger than any other part of him. He called it his gas tank.

"Time to fill up the old gas tank, Charlie," he said. "She's running on empty." After I slammed the trunk, I saw Anne Marie out on the porch steps, waving me close. A twenty-dollar bill was crumpled in her hand; her face was dark around her eyes.

"Take it," she said. "He's not going to have any money on him. He never does." Then, as if she had to explain herself to me, she said, "I'm just tired, Charlie. Tired of being a woman and tired of him being a man." She closed the door.

I took the bill, proud she trusted me, not him. It felt like a kind of forgiveness.

"Best wife I ever had. And the fightingest." Then he said, "I'm hungry. You hungry?"

I was starving, but my grandfather didn't stop at any of the restaurants we passed—not at the KFC, not at the Hardee's, not at the Junction Café—and since I was trailing him I couldn't stop either. So I cussed and kept following. We drove through the town square to a brick apartment building with a long black parking lot in front of it and an unused metal playground next door. It was where Celeste lived, and where my grandfather had lived when he was married to her. I parked beside him.

"Are you back with Celeste already?" I said. He didn't answer me.

"Get me the box with Celeste's name, would you?" he asked. Before I could argue, he was waddling toward the sidewalk where Celeste was waiting for him. She looked like Anne Marie, except her hair had gone bright white, and she was smaller-shouldered. She and my grandfather walked into her apartment, holding hands. When I lugged her box inside, she and my grandfather were sitting on the couch, close together. Their legs were touching. And him still married to Anne Marie. It was disgusting.

"Charlie here has a present for you," he said. "Where you want him to put it?"

"Anywhere, honey," she said. She looked over at me. "You alright?"

I started to tell her about the trouble I was in. About the car, about the condoms, but my grandfather interrupted.

"Charlie," he said. "Let me tell you a little secret. If you don't open your mouth too wide, it'll be full of food in a minute."

I carried the box back to her bedroom, which smelled of honey. My grandfather's old bedroom. Blue curtains, a white bedspread. It wasn't something I wanted to see, or think about. I slammed the door shut. When Celeste carried the two plates of fried pork chops out to us, I laid mine on the floor. Not that they noticed.

"Jesus Christmas," my grandfather said when he tasted it. "Burned my lip."

"Get you some ice, Randall," Celeste said.

"Would you do it?" he said. "I'm tired from all that carrying."

"Want me to wipe your butt next?" she said. "I bet you didn't carry a thing. Made your grandson do it all, didn't he, Charlie?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said, gratified. But she went and got the ice anyway. She rolled it inside a washcloth and pressed it up against his fat pink lip while my grandfather worked his tongue under his cheek. Celeste was letting two of her fingers glide over his chin and saying, "Poor Randall. Poor Randall."

"I don't like pork chops," I said.

My grandfather touched his pork chop with his finger, pronounced it fit to eat, and cut it into pieces with his knife and fork. Although he complimented almost every bite, he was eating quickly. Celeste watched every bite.

"A man's work is never done, is it, Charlie?" he said. "Help me up." He stuck out his paw, and I gladly pulled him to his feet. I liked Celeste but I was happy to leave.

"Just going to eat and run, aren't you, Randall?" she asked. My grandfather didn't say anything. Celeste picked up our plates from the floor and carried them into the kitchen, where they banged against the sink. We pulled the door shut behind us.

Back at the car, while my grandfather massaged his stomach, he looked up at her apartment. "Best wife I ever had," he said.

"And the fightingest?" I meant it to be sarcastic.

"No. The fightingest was Anne Marie. But the best overall, that was Celeste." Then he tapped me on the shoulder with his hat. "Now don't you tell your mother I'm here ranking women for you. She doesn't like that."

"My mother doesn't know I'm here," I said, but he interrupted me again.

"She knows. Women know everything or get to thinking they do, after a while."

He climbed into his car and powered the engine. I followed him. What else could I do?

The next two wives lived in the same white-floored nursing home. Not side-by-side but four doors down from each other. I found the box labeled Nichole and the box labeled Petty and carried them up the stairs while my grandfather rushed from room to room, telling each woman she was his only reason for visiting. I had been here before as a boy and I was used to the drill. He dumped me in Nichole's room while he went to see Petty. Nichole was sitting in her red chair, a baby blue blanket spread over her lap. Neither she nor Petty needed much medical help; they just lived here because they were alone in the world and would be until they died. I put Nichole's box in her closet. I felt at ease, now that I figured my grandfather wasn't moving back with any of these women.

"He's sitting in there with Petty, isn't he?" Nichole said. "I can smell that woman on him. If he liked her so much, he should have stayed married to her."

As my grandfather walked in the door, he called her name. He said: Nichole, Nichole, Nichole. She said mockingly: Petty, Petty, Petty.

"Now, honey, you don't believe that about me, do you?" my grandfather said. He lay down on her bed, stuffed her extra pillow under his neck.

"Jesus," I said. "Make yourself at home, why don't you?" But he didn't hear.

"Tell me you don't believe that, Nichole," he said, serious and fat-faced, like he actually meant it. She stopped repeating Petty's name. "That's my girl," he said. I carried the other box to Petty, who was sitting in bed, her pink blanket pulled up to her chin, watching the muted television.

"You smell like Nichole," she said. "That's who he wanted to see, you know. He's just pretending he wants to see me. He's guilty, that's why."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. Petty had always been one to say crazy things.

"You're a guilty one, too. I can see it in you. Aren't you?"

"I am." I felt my sins stretching inside me like a child wanting to be born. "My mother and I argued about a girl," I said, feeling relieved, hoping she might be able to absolve me, but my grandfather came in then, booming her name, kissing her cheek.

"You like my grandson?" he asked. "You like me? You going to keep my box for me?" He was speaking loudly, not waiting for an answer. "You got anything to eat?"

She pointed to a little painted tin on her bedside table. My grandfather scooped cookies into his hand. He passed me the tin, but I didn't take any.

"Better take some," Petty said. "I bet you Randall already ate everything Nichole had in her room. Didn't you, Randall?" She pointed her red, crooked finger at him. "If he could eat all the time, he'd be happier than a hard egg," she said.

"I better get Charlie out of here before you poison him," my grandfather said. "You're not too mad at me, are you, Petty?"

He leaned over the bed and kissed her cheek. On our way out, we walked by Nichole's room. I waved to her, though she was looking at a women's magazine, pretending not to see us.

In the parking lot we moved the last two boxes into his car. One of them had the name "Dorothy" on it. My grandmother. Once a month, my mother and I drove up to Elizabethtown to see her. She was seventy-four, still working as a grocery store cashier, still complaining about my hairstyle and my lead-foot driving. She and my grandfather hadn't spoken in years, as far as I knew. And they certainly didn't kissy-face in bed together. I had to credit my grandmother for that.

"Is she next?" I said. I was afraid to see her. Probably she had already talked to my mother. Probably she was getting ready to call the police on me.

"Why don't you take one to her?" my grandfather said. "She don't want to see me, but she'll want to see you."

"Not this time, she won't," I said. What he said next surprised me.

"I know you're in trouble," he said. "Probably I'm supposed to tell you to say you're sorry or something. Probably that's why your mother let you come. But, Charlie, nobody ever told me anything that meant anything to me. Except get out." He sat down on the hood of his car. "Words don't mean very much, Charlie. Or they mean something that's different than what they say. Do you know that?"

"Then what does mean something? Lying in bed with your ex-wife? It's sick."

Instead of getting mad at me, he rubbed his thumb over the ridge of his upper lip, thinking of what to say. It was pitiful to watch. It softened me.

"We'll do it together," I said. He fanned us both with his gray hat. He looked relieved.

This time I led the way while my grandfather followed, and this time he was the one who carried the box to the steps of my grandmother's little wooden porch. He dropped it there, then went back to the car and fiddled with the radio. I was nervous, too. My grandmother was the one who had taught my mother how to give a tongue-licking, after all. When she came to the door, she was fixing a green, beetle-shaped pin to her blouse and she didn't open the door until she was done. Then she started talking in her jerky, circular way, answering her own questions.

"All right," she said. "Come on in, then. Have to come to your senses sometime, I guess. Dumbest thing I ever heard of, though."

That was when she realized that I had her cardboard box. "Is he kicked out again?" she said. "He's afraid to come in here, isn't he? Go ask him if he wants a cup of coffee, that'll shake him up. Don't do that, that's too mean. Put the box in the attic, I guess. There's nothing in there anybody would ever want."

While she pulled down the attic's trapdoor and unfolded its metal stairs, I tried to guess what might be inside the box. But once I was up there, once I had set the box down beside all the other junk up there—a wooden makeup table, a cracked mirror, my old bicycle, a stack of other boxes my grandfather had delivered over the years—I didn't have the heart to open it up. What if it was something disgusting like his underwear or his sheets?

What if it was something stupid like a T-shirt or a photograph, something to make them remember him? What would I do then?

When I came down the steps, my grandmother was pouring an RC in a glass of ice. There was a peeled-open package of Little Debbie Swiss Cake Rolls on the counter. I was expecting her to yell at me, but she didn't.

"You know you're going to have to have a talk with that girl's parents," she said. "And you're going to have to explain yourself. It's not going to be fun, and your mother and I will go with you if you want, but there isn't any other way around it. You have to live in the light where people can see you. You can't live in the dark all the time with your secrets and your desires. You hear?"

I didn't say anything. It was like I was in a trance, like I had stopped breathing or thinking or smelling. I felt my muscles weakening and the heft of my body getting deeper, digging like an anchor into my grandmother's linoleum floor.

I might have stood there forever except that the sound of my grandfather's car horn startled me. Blatting once, twice. Waking my muscles, lightening the load on my feet. The third time I felt fully awake. I fished my mother's keys from my pocket and gave them to my grandmother.

"You are the stupidest thing under the sun, aren't you?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am." I couldn't look at her. I couldn't look at any woman.

"Don't yes-ma'am me right now. That's even stupider." But she took the keys.

On my way out I grabbed the Swiss Cake Rolls for my grandfather because I felt sorry for him. I felt sorrier for myself as I slugged across

the lawn toward his Oldsmobile, feeling my grandmother's eyes in my back as my grandfather honked one more time. My grandfather didn't say anything until we were halfway down the road, until I placed the Swiss Cake Rolls on the pleat of his pants.

"These hers?" he said.

"Yep."

Grimacing in a proud, ugly way, he brushed them off his leg and onto the floor.

I felt sorry for my grandfather until we were safely out of sight of my grandmother's house, until he started telling me how my grandmother was the best wife he'd ever had. "We would have stayed married a hundred years if we hadn't had any kids. Kids gave her somebody else to keep happy." He was looking at me, not the road.

"You're driving all over the lane," I said. "Watch where you're going. Jesus."

On our way to the cemetery we stopped at a gas station, where he asked me to put $2.25 in the tank. "Why only $2.25?" I asked. He was holding nine quarters in his hand.

"I got twenty bucks from Anne Marie," I said proudly. "She gave it to me."

"Well, that's a hell of a good thing, isn't it?" He hustled into the station with the twenty. When he came out from the store, he was happy again, with Hostess Twinkies and Snickers bars and Swiss Cake Rolls tucked between his forearm and his chest.

"Eat some," he said. Watching his white tongue press against his top lip as he opened the wrapper of his Snickers bar made me sick.

"All you do is eat your ex-wives' food and kiss their cheeks and

lay on their beds," I said. "Don't you do anything yourself? Don't you ever think a little?"

He placed his candy bar slowly on his lap and thumbed his lip. "All I do is think," he said. The rest of the drive he was quiet.

Lorene, wife number one, was in the town's fenced-in cemetery. She had outlived their marriage by twenty years, but now she had been dead for another twenty. This time I didn't carry the box.

"I think she's going to need some help opening this one," I said.

"I don't give them the box for them to open," he said as he hoisted it up from the trunk. "I give them the box so they can hold it for me."

"Whatever." I wandered off among the dead people, looking at the names that I remembered from my grandmother's stories—my great-aunts and my great-greats and my cousins who had passed in Vietnam—and none of them meant anything to me. Nothing did. Not this town that my mother and I had left. And not these people—living or dead—who were still in it. I wasn't going to talk to Lena's parents about what we had done. It wasn't something to talk about. Probably Lena would feel funny about doing it, knowing that her parents knew. Probably things would go bad between us and we would never see each other anymore. As I walked around, I understood why they bury people under so much dirt. It was so they wouldn't ever feel this alone.

Finally I wandered back to my grandfather. He was lying flat on top of the dark grass in front of Lorene's headstone, on top of the grass that grew from the dirt that protected her coffin. There was a white pillow tucked under his head. He was snoring. It was an awful, growling sound, the sound a wood chipper makes when it tears apart tree limbs, the sound of things breaking into tiny pieces.

When I was a little boy, his snoring drove me crazy, but now I didn't mind. Probably because the rest of the cemetery was so quiet you could hear yourself think. I lay down beside him.

And for the first time that day, I had the chance to talk to someone. Nobody was talking to me, though it was true that nobody was listening either. I felt the weight of my problems packing me down, pressing me into the ground, but for some reason I could not think of anything to say. Then I said something I didn't expect, something I hadn't thought about but that rose inside me like a balloon.

"On the phone," I said, "when she sounded like *hunh-hunh-hunh-hunh*, like when I touched her, it's awful to say it, but I wanted her right then. Even though I knew she was probably crying, even though I knew it really wasn't the same sound at all." I felt myself getting large, wanting her again.

I felt terrible and I also felt better. I didn't want to cry; I didn't want to scream. I didn't want to do anything, but there was this energy buzzing through me. I started to laugh and I laughed until my stomach hurt. I do not remember falling asleep on the thick green grass, but I did.

It was dark when I woke. I slid my hand through the grass, over Lorene's headstone. My grandfather wasn't beside me. I brushed myself off and walked to his car, where he was listening to a Reds game on the radio. Listening to baseball was something he did most summer nights, a harmless, wasteful thing. All the food he bought at the gas station was lined up on the dashboard of the car, unwrapped but uneaten.

"She was the best wife you ever had, right?" I said. He shushed

me and pointed at the radio. Dan Driessen flied out, and then they went to commercial.

"Tell your mother thanks for letting you come up," he said. "It was a help to me."

"My mother didn't let me come up," I said. "I've been trying to tell you."

"When you're living with them, Charlie, you've got to please them," he said. "And once you're gone, they love nothing more than pleasing you. It's how things are."

"I was talking," I said, but he shushed me.

"He's a good pitcher," he said. "Tom Seaver is."

"I guess." I was staring out the window at the dark grass and the gray headstones.

"Charlie," he said. Just my name. I turned to him and saw his lips moving up and down like a fish's mouth, trying to form a word, but nothing was coming out. How could you keep from feeling sorry for him? Then Seaver threw a pitch past Keith Hernandez for a strike, and he grinned.

"Take one," he said, waving at the food on his dashboard.

"One?" I was suddenly very hungry. Or maybe I just didn't want him to have all this food we'd bought with Anne Marie's money. "I'm taking all of them."

We laid into those snack cakes like savages in the dark, shoving whole Twinkies into our mouths. They were awful, all of them, stale and dusty, and they dissolved in my mouth before I could properly taste them, but we kept eating. Our teeth crunched through the peanuts in the Snickers bars, our stomachs grumbled through our poisons, our feet tromped on the discarded, defeated plastic wrappers on the car floor. We ate through Tom Seaver's strikeouts and

through the commercial. We ate through every piece of junk food he had. When we finished, we were both breathing hard.

"Anne Marie's got some ice cream at home in her freezer," my grandfather said. "It's been seven hours. That's just about long enough for her to get soft on me again."

"You think?"

"I think."

"What are you waiting for?" While he fumbled quietly with the gears, I felt the panic moving darkly inside me again, filling the space where my hunger had been, weighting me to the seat of the car. "Why are we still sitting here?" I said. One of my fists was on the dashboard, one on my stomach. "Put it in drive. Fast." I was talking loud, so anyone could hear me.

Spit Baths

CRAWFORD'S MOTHER CAME BACK EARLY for him. Just a few hours early, but still Maw-Maw held her ground. From his bed, Crawford heard his mother pleading her case. She and Maw-Maw were standing in the living room.

"It makes you happy to act like this, doesn't it?" his mother said. "It has nothing to do with right or wrong."

"I'm just being sensible," Maw-Maw said. "There's no reason to wake a boy up in the middle of the night."

"Thirty days are over. Look at the clock. It's already past midnight."

Crawford heard his mother's feet clomping against the wooden floor. The door whined, and light cut into his bedroom. She was standing in the doorway.

"I know you're awake," she said. "I know you can hear me."

Crawford gripped his fingers into fists. Thirty days ago, his mother dropped him off at Maw-Maw's house. She was going ahead to Springfield, Missouri, to find an apartment for them. There was a man there, but Crawford had never met him. Crawford had marked off the thirty days on his wall calendar, waiting for her return, waiting for the time he could shed himself of his grandmother and her silly rules and her strange smells, but now that his mother had returned he did not want her. She sat down on the comforter; her long hair settled over his chest.

"Come to me, Crawford," she said.

He was still as a slab beneath her. Until she left for Springfield, he had always tried to keep his mother from crying. That was his job. All he had to do was lie in her lap and wait for her to stop. She would say, "How can I even think of crying when I've got my baby boy?" But now he did not want her to stop. He wanted to know how long she would cry before she gave up.

"She can't have you. I won't let her." She wiped her eyes with her wrist.

His mother stood up. The ends of her hair tickled his chest and then were gone. In the hallway his mother and Maw-Maw argued.

"I'm not even going to sleep," his mother said. "I'm coming back as soon as there's sun."

"You know he doesn't wake up until eight or eight-thirty. Don't you want him to have breakfast?"

"Oh, Mother."

"Oh, Milly." The names sat there by themselves, soaking up the accusations. Finally his mother left. Maw-Maw was grumbling, Dummy was barking. Now Maw-Maw stood in the doorway.

"Only six hours till you get rid of me," Maw-Maw said to him. "You know what your mother likes about Springfield, Missouri, don't you? It's not Joelton, Kentucky, that's what." She lit her cigarette with a Bic and breathed hard. The smoke was silky in the room. "Can you get up on your own? Or do you need me to help you?"

At the beginning of his month, Crawford had not answered Maw-Maw out of loyalty to his mother. Now he wanted to respond to her, but he did not know how. Always, she was asking questions that he couldn't answer.

"Get up, already," she said. "You can sleep all the way to Springfield, Missouri, if you want to."

He sat down beside Maw-Maw on the living room couch. The Cincinnati Reds were playing on the television, a late-night game in San Diego. Two years ago, when Crawford was six, his grandmother took him to a game at Riverfront Stadium. She told him that Johnny Bench, the Reds' great catcher, could hold nine baseballs in his hands at the same time. "Some bodies are made by God for special things," she told Crawford. "The other teams don't even try to steal on him anymore." They ate at the White Castles in Cynthiana on the way up and at the White Castles in Lawrenceburg on the way home. Back in Joelton, his mother asked if he liked the game. "Liked it?" Maw-Maw said. "When Johnny Bench came up to the plate, I think Crawford wet his britches." "I did not," Crawford said. Back then, Maw-Maw and his mother got along, and he was at Maw-Maw's house every weekend.

Now Johnny Bench had got old; the Reds did not even let him play catcher anymore. He played third base. When the Padres' second baseman hit the ball his way, Bench bent down stiffly, too

late; the ball bounced off his glove. Some of the fans in San Diego booed. Johnny Bench wiped his dirty hands on his white pants, staining them.

"Those people would boo Jesus Christ if he stuttered," Maw-Maw said.

"When you don't have your catcher's mask, you can feel awfully naked out there," the announcer said.

"Shut up," Crawford said. He turned to his grandmother. "They shouldn't talk about him that way."

"I'm going to turn this off if it's going to make you upset." Maw-Maw placed her palm over his face, blocking his view of the TV. "They're still showing replays." When they were done replaying Bench's error, she removed her hand and wiped it on her slacks.

The game ended soon after. Dan Driessen struck out; the Reds lost. Crawford was biting his lip.

"Crawford," she said. He wouldn't look at her. "It's not something to be sad about. It's a ball game." She turned off the television. "It's my fault. I should never have let you watch. You won't have to worry about the Reds anymore when you're in Springfield, Missouri. Cardinals fans, I guess."

Maw-Maw disappeared into the bathroom. She was gone a long time. When she came out, her hair was mussed, her eyes red.

"Is this going to be the way you remember me?" she said.

Maw-Maw told him she had a present for him, something he could take with him to Springfield, Missouri. She walked quickly around the house, opening dresser drawers, rummaging through her kitchen cabinets. She offered him a Joelton High baseball cap,

but then she took it back. "Just joshing you," she said. "I've got something better than that." But she didn't. Crawford could tell. She kept opening and closing doors.

"Maybe you left it somewhere," he said. He was trying to be helpful. She snapped her fingers.

"You are smart," she said. "It's at the Laundromat."

Before they walked to the Laundromat, he had to do his morning chores. By the time they got back, his mother would be waiting for them, Maw-Maw said. In the kitchen he filled Maw-Maw's basin with lukewarm water and rubbed lye soap over a washcloth. Then he led Dummy outside. Dummy was black and tan, a mutt like a thousand dogs in town, and Crawford did not like him. While Crawford scrubbed, the dog whined. That made Crawford want to scrub harder.

"You shouldn't hate anything that loves you," Maw-Maw said. She was standing on the porch, holding a green towel and a cigarette. He let go of Dummy, and the dog shook itself free from the water and ran into the house.

Maw-Maw spit into the green towel. Then she started scrubbing his face. Every day she did this, and still Crawford hated it. He closed his eyes and bit his lip.

"The spit catches what the soap won't," Maw-Maw said. She was singing as she scrubbed his cheeks, "Just as I Am," a church song. She no longer seemed unhappy.

"When we get to the Laundromat, you're not going to believe your present."

When she was done, he walked to the bathroom and checked himself in the mirror. She scrubbed so hard that he was sure she was wearing away the bones in his face. One day he was certain

that he would look in the mirror and see a different person. But it hadn't happened yet. Same brown eyes, same fatty cheeks.

"Don't start dreaming now," Maw-Maw said. "You can dream all the way to Springfield, Missouri, if you want to."

They each carried a bag of laundry, and Dummy walked between them. As they walked, Dummy batted his nose wetly against their thighs. It took them ten minutes to walk the hill to the shopping plaza. In the plaza they passed the Big China buffet and the storefront where the Holy Angels Church met. The Laundromat was the next store, then there was the Big Lots, then the Houchens grocery. Maw-Maw did laundry for the other people on the block, a dollar fifty a load, which left seventy-five cents once she paid for the washer and the dryer. The Laundromat manager gave her a key, and sometimes she went in at odd hours so she could finish up.

Usually Crawford had to do work in his schoolbooks while Maw-Maw folded the laundry. It was the summertime, and he did not have any classes, but Maw-Maw had ordered copies of next year's workbooks from the teachers. This morning, though, she didn't bring the workbook. She bought Crawford a Grape Crush and a Snickers from the vending machine. Maw-Maw sat down in an orange plastic chair. She was staring at the floor.

"My gift for you isn't something you can hold," she said. "Not like that Snickers bar. Where'd that Snickers bar go, anyway?"

"I ate it."

"And now it's gone." She snapped her fingers. "But what I've got is something you can keep forever. Don't dream out on me, Crawford."

He wasn't dreaming. He was thinking, which was an entirely different process. Mostly, he was thinking about the Laundromat, its

polished tiles, its ammonia smell, the grinding sound the machines made. The taste of Grape Crush. He didn't think there would be a Laundromat like it in Springfield, Missouri. He didn't suppose he'd miss it.

"Crawford, every day your mother wakes up and says it's a new day. But the truth is there aren't any new days. Every day is the same day we've lived before. It just seems new to us because we can't remember. We're the forgettingest people God ever made. To the angels who live in the clouds, our days are like records. Our days move around the same circle, morning to night to morning, and as they turn they edge a little closer to the middle, to the place where they get to stop moving, and everything else moves around them. That's what's happening to me. My circle's getting smaller and smaller."

One of the washing machines stopped, and she walked over and moved the shirts into a dryer. Then the second machine stopped, and she did the same thing. Maw-Maw bought herself a Grape Crush and drank a swallow and gave the rest to him.

"Not all at once," she said. "You'll burp." She sat down in the orange chair. "Come here." She waved to him. "Sit here. On my lap."

Crawford didn't want to. He stared out the window. There was a police car in the parking lot. His Cousin Flo.

"It's my last day, Crawford," she said. He gave in, walked over to her. Maw-Maw's knees were sharp, her fingers cold.

"Last night, the angels let me hear your record. I told them I was old. I told them you were going away from me, and I might not see you again. So they played it for me. It was the record of your days. They played it, and it told me you were going to be a good boy, even when I won't be there to tell you to be one. It told me no

matter how old you were or what you ever saw, you wouldn't let the world dirty you. There are going to be days when you won't want to be a good boy anymore. But I want you to remember what I'm telling you. It's who you are. You're my good boy. You can't escape that."

The noise he heard from Dummy made him laugh.

"Dummy just went to the bathroom," he said.

"Twenty years from now, that's all you're going to remember, isn't it? Dummy went to the bathroom." She let go of his cheeks and laid her hands in her lap. "Don't shake your head at me. I can see the truth."

Maw-Maw found some paper towels in the bathroom. She was down on her knees, wiping up the floor. It hurt Crawford to watch her, though he didn't know why. He was watching her when Cousin Flo opened the door.

"Lizbeth, you bend down that way, you might never stand up again," Flo said. "Let one of us get it."

"I'm nearly done."

"Your grandmother's about the stubbornest woman I ever met," Flo said. "She wouldn't let a bird teach her to fly." He took off his blue police cap and placed it on Crawford. It hung low, over Crawford's eyes.

"Springfield, Missouri," Flo said. "What's in Springfield, Missouri?"

"Something," Crawford said. "I don't know."

"Sorry about the Reds," Flo said. "I heard it on the radio."

Maw-Maw brushed dust from her knees. "Take that hat off his head. That's not who he is."

"Let him keep it if he wants it," Flo said. Flo placed his hand

on Crawford's shoulder. Then he took the hat between his fingers and set it back on his own head.

"Dispatch told me one of the patrol saw you out here, and I just wanted to make sure you were okay, Lizbeth. Crawford, I'll see you at breakfast, alright?" Every morning for the last month, Cousin Flo came by Maw-Maw's house and ate bacon with Crawford and talked about the Reds and his police car.

"You best come early," Maw-Maw said. "Milly's already been by once."

Cousin Flo put his hands in his pockets. "Thirty days," he said. "Springfield, Missouri." Dummy was licking Flo's ankle, but Flo didn't notice.

Crawford helped Maw-Maw fold the clothes. Really, he only helped with the towels and the sheets. He tried folding the shirts and the slacks, but he was never good enough, and Maw-Maw slapped his hand away, not hard, and refolded them herself. But the sheets he was good at. He and Maw-Maw stood at opposite ends of the folding table, pulling the sheet taut between them. Then he walked to her, lifting his edge toward her fingers, so the middle wouldn't drag the floor. They folded one sheet in this manner, then another.

"How you going to do this without me?" he asked. It was the wrong question.

"I guess I did it for sixty years before you came, didn't I?" He carried his end toward her. He knew he had hurt her feelings by reminding her, but he was just curious.

"Let's have fun," Maw-Maw said. "What's fun for you?"

"I don't know," he said. "Baseball, I guess."

"That game we went to, what do you remember about it?"

"The White Castles. We went twice."

"Well, I suppose they'll have the White Castles in Springfield, Missouri."

She stacked the sheets and the shirts in one bag, the slacks and the towels in the other. "Sometime, you make your mother take you to White Castles. And you think about your grandmother, you hear? If there's no White Castles, go to the Krystals. It's mostly the same, only except for the mustard."

Cousin Flo knocked on the Laundromat door. He was sweating, and before he came inside, he wiped his forehead with a white handkerchief.

"Lizbeth, how about you let me drive you home?"

"Am I under arrest?" she said.

"You ought to be, you old mule."

"I done told you, if I'm not under arrest I'm not riding in a police car. It's a jinx."

"Crawford, what did I tell you about your grandmother?"

"That she's pleasant as a peach."

Cousin Flo laughed. Maw-Maw scolded him for teaching Crawford to fib, but she was laughing, too. They stopped laughing when Cousin Flo told why he came back.

"I just saw Milly," he said. "Parked in your driveway."

"It's too early, still," Maw-Maw said.

"I didn't ask her what time it was."

His mother was waiting for them in the driveway. The overhead light was on in her car. His mother looking at herself in the rearview mirror. She lifted up a string of her long hair and snipped it with scissors.

"What does she think she's doing?" Maw-Maw said.

"We had a touch of an argument," Flo said. "I think I made her mad."

His mother put down her scissors and got out from the car. She was halfway done with her hair. It was almost two feet long on her left side, and cut up by her ear on the right, except for a few strands that she had missed.

"She told me she was going to show me how she had changed," Flo said.

"From bad to worse," Maw-Maw said.

"Lizbeth, there's little ears back there." They were both quiet. Flo turned to him, talking through the screen that separated the back seat from the front.

"Go on and say hello to her. Do that before you worry about packing up or saying good-bye, okay?"

When Crawford opened the door, Dummy jumped out. Dummy ran toward Crawford's mother and Crawford followed slowly across the sidewalk.

"What do you think?" She slid her fingers through the short side of her hair. "I'm going to get a stylist to fix it up right, once we get there. Nobody in Springfield will ever know that I had long hair. Doesn't that seem funny to you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Yes, ma'am, my toe. You aren't in her house anymore. I'm not ever going to do that to you again. Do you believe me?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Listen to you, Mr. Fancy Britches." She put her hands in her pockets. She was nervous. "What do you want to talk about? It's kind of a long drive."

He didn't get to answer. While he was thinking about it, Maw-Maw and Flo walked over. Maw-Maw and his mother chatted nicely for a minute, and then they got to arguing. Maw-Maw was trying to tell her what books he had worked on during the summer, what work he could do in Springfield so he could stay ahead.

"What he's going to do in Springfield is have a good time," his mother said. "We're going to eat fried chicken and ice cream, aren't we, Crawford?" He didn't answer. She didn't expect him to.

"That ain't the only thing in life," Maw-Maw said. "Not by a far piece."

"You and your gabbing," his mother said. "We're going to forget all about that the moment we cross the Hardin County line, aren't we, Crawford?"

Maw-Maw put her finger on his cheek. "Crawford, tell her what I told you," she said. "I know you remember."

Crawford stood there between the two women. He didn't want to say anything. His mother wasn't even looking at him. She was glaring at Maw-Maw. And Maw-Maw was poking him with her finger.

"Maw-Maw said she could see the future."

"Shit," his mother said. "She can't even see the past."

His mother laughed, and Flo laughed, too, a little. Crawford didn't mean to laugh, but the curse word was funny. His laughing came up from him like a bubble through water. He was biting his lip, squeezing his eyes shut, still giggling, when Maw-Maw started dragging him to Flo's car.

Behind him, Flo and his mother were talking. Then they were arguing. Flo wanted her to apologize. She wouldn't. Flo had been laughing, too, she said. She wasn't any worse than anybody else. After that they started calling names.

"Flo," Maw-Maw said. "Stop wasting your time with her."

Flo drove them back up the hill toward the shopping center. His mother's car was right behind them. Neither car was driving fast.

"I'm not going to go far, Lizbeth," Flo said. "Just far enough to where you calm down. Both you and her."

"That might be farther than you can drive." A minute later, she said, "Pull in by the Big Lots. I'm going to get my baby a present."

Flo didn't want to let Maw-Maw into the Big Lots. He had a key, of course. The ring that hung from his belt had keys to nearly every business in Joelton. But he didn't often use them.

"There's not going to be any cashiers, Lizbeth. You're not making any sense."

"I'm tired of being the only one worried about making sense."

Dummy was sitting in the backseat, pawing against the cushion. Crawford petted Dummy. When that didn't distract the dog, Crawford squeezed its paws, so Dummy couldn't do any harm to the seat cover.

After Flo let them in, Crawford and Maw-Maw wandered the aisles of the Big Lots. Flo hadn't wanted to, but Maw-Maw insisted. Flo said he would open the door, but he wouldn't turn on the lights. He gave them a flashlight, which Crawford waved over the rows of Members Only jackets and Duck Head slacks. At one bin, Maw-Maw grabbed a baseball cap and placed it on Crawford's head, but she didn't think it was good enough for him. She handed him a pack of baseball cards, but he didn't open them.

"You're not going to be able to pay for this," he said.

"Everybody pays for everything," she said. "That's something else you learn."

Through the window, Crawford saw his mother and Flo sitting on the hood of Flo's police car. The parking lot lights were on. Crawford saw Dummy lying on the pavement under their feet. His mother and Flo weren't talking. He and Maw-Maw walked into the sporting goods aisles. Maw-Maw lifted up the red catcher's mask and ran her finger along its edge.

"This month didn't mean anything to you, did it?" She was speaking quietly. "You thought I just made you wash Dummy and do your schoolbooks and fold the sheets because I was mean, didn't you?"

"I didn't think anything," he said. "Not ever. I promise."

She placed her fingers on his forehead. He felt her calluses sliding his hair from one side to the other.

"I'm not blaming you. I'm just trying to understand."

The Big Lots automatic door hummed open. They heard Cousin Flo calling for them. "You two lovebirds okay back there?" he said.

"You could stay with me." Then she said, "No, you couldn't." They walked a few more aisles before she spoke again.

"I didn't get you much of a gift, did I?"

"I don't want any presents."

"Well, sometimes, you think you're giving someone a present and they don't see it. And sometimes you get a present and you didn't even realize it. Can you remember that?"

"I remember what you told me before."

"Don't talk any more. Shine the light on this aisle." Maw-Maw picked some shin guards from one rack, a chest protector from another. There was a stack of mitts near the end of the row.

"Put the flashlight on the floor and be still." Maw-Maw bent slowly to the floor and buckled the shin guards, one around each leg. Then she fastened the chest protector. It was all too big; the shin guards reached his waist, the chest protector hung to his ankles. But he didn't say anything. She tightened the mask straps and slid it over his head. Still the mask was too large. It pitched forward on his head; the foam slid over his eyes.

"I can't see," he said.

"That doesn't matter. Hold onto my hand."

They walked up the aisle. Crawford had to shuffle his feet; the shin guards kept him from bending his knees. He could see a patch of the floor in front of him, and as they walked, he stared at the white tiles and the yellow circle of light. When they were near the front, Maw-Maw let go of him.

"We're just a few steps from the door," Maw-Maw said. "But they can't see us. Take a minute. Tap the protector. What does it feel like?"

Crawford bent to touch the hard plastic shin guards, the thick padding of his chest protector. He touched the cold wires of the catcher's mask. He knew that he probably looked silly; nothing fit him right. But he felt like he could walk through a fire without it burning him.

"Crawford, right now I'm going to hit you in the chest, but it's not going to hurt."

He didn't say anything. He tensed his muscles and waited. When she struck him, he staggered backwards a step, but he wasn't hurt. He rubbed his chest, where she had hit him. Couldn't feel anything there, either.

"You probably thought that was going to hurt, didn't you?" she said. "But nothing hurts. Not even a knife in your throat. That's the truth."

He took her hand again, and they walked toward the front door. By tilting his head back, he could see his reflection in the doorway. He looked short next to Maw-Maw, like a fat little beetle with an orange belly and orange legs. He punched himself in the stomach. He could see his hand in the window, but he could barely feel the blow. He punched himself again.

The automatic door slid open for them, and Maw-Maw let go

of his hand. Cousin Flo was asking him a question, and Dummy was up on his feet barking at him, but Crawford wouldn't answer any of them. Crawford stood on the black welcome mat, his hand squeezed into a fist, his eyes on the ground in front of him.

"Come here, Crawford," his mother said.

He didn't turn to her, nor to Maw-Maw, nor to Dummy or Cousin Flo. He punched himself once in the stomach, but he couldn't feel it, not enough, and so he punched himself again.

Field Trip

AS SOON AS THE BUS DRIVER pulls the door shut, I drop into an empty seat, pressing my head against the glass, closing my eyes so I can't see the girls waving their arms out the windows, muffling my ears so I can't hear the boys chewing gum. Mrs. Harden and Shanna are standing in the aisle, delivering their speech about good behavior, but I'm thinking about bad behavior, about Shanna's body, which I can see even though my eyes are closed. It's been six months since I've touched anybody's body, since I broke up with Andrea. A boy named Douglas Patton sits down beside me but doesn't say hello or slow his chatter with his friends in the row behind us or in any way disrupt my daydream. I love field trips.

Something Mrs. Harden tells the bus driver pierces my daydream, though. We aren't going to the museum on the permission slip. We're going to my father's house.

"My father doesn't even live in this town," I say, opening my eyes. Mrs. Harden is staring at me, taking notes on her clipboard without looking down at her hands. It's weird to make eye contact with her and still see her hand writing away as if it's got its own brain, writing her list of good and bad things I've done, a compilation of faults for my end-of-the-year review. I look away. "It wouldn't be a positive learning experience," I say desperately.

"Mr. Mirer's father is a teacher also," Mrs. Harden says to the students. "A teacher of genetics."

"No, he's not," I say. "He's an accountant. He knows nothing about pedagogy."

But Mrs. Harden is walking the aisles, passing out a two-page, stapled handout. Douglas, who's reading his copy, asks me, "Who's this Andrea?"

"Andrea?" I ask. "Give that to me. What does it say about her?" Andrea was my high school girlfriend, my college girlfriend, too. We planned to get married after our college graduation, to attend the same law school, to lead one preconceived life, but I bailed without giving anybody a good reason, which led my father to accuse me of self-sabotage. I fell into this job, into being a teaching intern, by accident.

Mrs. Harden takes Douglas's copy away before I can read it. She holds it in front of her while she instructs the class to find each mention of my first name—Eric—to cross it out and to write instead, "Mr. Mirer Jr." Even in adult-to-adult conversations in the teachers' lounge, Mrs. Harden refers to us by only our last names. She's the grade coordinator; look at her name tag: "Mrs. Harden, Grade Coordinator and English." Shanna's says, "Ms. Mercer, Science and Math." Mine says, "Mr. Mirer, History." (Mrs. Harden's kind enough not to write "teaching intern.") The kids

have name tags with exclamation points: "Douglas Patton! Seventh Grader!"

While Mrs. Harden reads from my father's handout, Shanna slides into the seat in front of mine. She's twenty-five, a real teacher, and she talks as if we're in the middle of a long conversation that started years ago and won't ever reach an ending.

"Nice outfit, by the way," she says. "Field trip informal, I suppose."

Looking down, I'm surprised to see that I'm not wearing any clothes. My testicles lie flat on the bus's brown plastic seat like two deflated balloons. My name tag dangles from my chest hairs. When I tug, it hurts.

"But I dressed this morning," I say. "I know I did."

"Shh," Shanna says. "Mrs. Harden's about to turn around. Just walk normal, like you don't notice. She might not mark it on her clipboard."

The bus stops in front of our old house, the house my mother and my father and I shared until I was fourteen, until he moved west to Springfield, Missouri, where he's lived since. After he split, my mother and I squeezed into a little apartment up the hill from the Chi-Chi's, an apartment too small for our furniture, which we left behind in the house for the next owners to deal with.

My father is standing on the wooden front porch waving us inside. He's shaved his beard, trimmed his bushy eyebrows, even made himself look shorter, more like a regular, middle-aged man, instead of the world's tallest and hairiest accountant, which is what he used to call himself. He's also wearing enormous green sunglasses, cheap ones that Mrs. Harden will think frivolous. "Look at that," I say, but as she writes in her clipboard, I realize that she

may well think that I am responsible for my father's bad choices, so I rush to the porch and sweep the sunglasses off his nose. Since I don't have any pockets I can use to hide the glasses, I toss them into the hedges.

"Nice pants," my father says.

When Mrs. Harden catches up to us, she sticks a name tag on his lapel. "Mr. Mirer Sr.," it says. "Parent/Educator."

My father's changed almost everything about the house. Instead of our red couch and upright piano, there are six rows of theater seating, the good kind with fluffy, reclining chairs. And instead of the kitchen and the dining room, there's an open space and a gigantic projection-screen television where the sink used to be. I like being inside. It's the only place other than school that doesn't remind me of Andrea. We never did it here, not on the couch, not in my bedroom, not in the backyard. I didn't start with Andrea until my mother and I moved to the apartment near the Chi-Chi's.

My bedroom is smaller than I remember but preserved intact. The same bedspread showing a map of the United States. The same stack of shoeboxes in a corner, each filled with unsorted 1982 Topps baseball cards. "Ray Knight," I say, looking at one. Then, remembering my condition, I reach into the closet, which miraculously is full of my old things, slacks and T-shirts and collared jackets.

Even though I've grown nine inches since I was fourteen, the blue jeans still fit. The shirts, however, all disintegrate into threads when I touch them, but that problem I solve by zipping up my gray Members Only jacket.

"Don't have to worry about Mrs. Harden now," I say.

Before returning to the screening room, I step into the bathroom so I can clean my pants with a washcloth, so I can look teacherly

for the students. Inexplicably, my mother is sitting on the edge of the bathtub, combing her long, brown hair. She's in the white gown she wears to work at the nursing home. Her patch says, "Annie, Orderly." She doesn't seem surprised to see me.

"You're upset," she says. "Aren't you? You don't have to tell me why. Would it make you feel better if I held your hand?" I give her my left one. "Would it make you feel better if I held them both?"

From the hallway Mrs. Harden is looking in at us, jotting something on her clipboard, something else I'll have to explain at the end of the year. I slam the door.

"Look what you did," I say. I splash water on my face while my mother tells me not to get upset. "I have to get upset," I say.

"You don't have to get upset at me."

"We have the same argument every day." I turn off the faucet. "You can't stay here. What if Mrs. Harden needs to use the bathroom? Go hide in my bedroom."

"I won't do it," she says, but she does. That's the power we have over each other.

My mother walks down the hallway toward my bedroom. "I don't see why I'm doing this," she says as I lock the door.

Back in the living room, my father is standing near the television, pointing a bamboo stick at the screen, at pictures of my mother projected there. The students are all sitting in their chairs, sipping orange Kool-Aid from plastic cups. One girl's taking notes on her handout.

"A good woman," my father says. "A woman with a good soul."

I sit down beside Shanna, who glances at me, then whispers, "This is such perfect timing. You walk in buck naked and up on screen you're about to be born."

It's true. I look down at my white legs; run my fingers through my chest hairs. Where did my Members Only jacket go?

My father taps the television screen firmly with his bamboo stick, pointing at an overblown picture of me as a child. He's talking about me like I was his patient.

"Eric was a well-developed baby," he says, "with a propensity for nighttime crying. Typically Eric would cry for a few minutes at about three-thirty in the morning, then pause for ninety seconds while he defecated, then resume crying again. Eric had the largest lung capacity of any child ever born in Mirth-Lace Hospital."

Shanna leans over, whispers to me. "It's true that you were a cute baby." For some reason this feels like an accusation. Mrs. Harden stands up quickly, raises her palm in the air, her signal for quiet. "Mr. Mirer Sr. means to say Mr. Mirer Jr.," she says. I cannot tell you how much this reassures me.

"Mr. Mirer Jr.'s extremities grew quickly," my father says.

I try not to listen during my father's talk, which is mind-grindingly dull, but for some reason the only thing I can think of is Andrea. When I stand up, I have to shield my genitals with my hands.

This time no one's waiting for me in the bathroom. I sit on the john and think about Andrea's legs, about her tan lines, which isn't a good idea; just as I feel myself getting excited, someone knocks at the door. It's Douglas Patton.

"Mr. Mirer?" the boy says. "Mr. Junior? I have to go."

I look hurriedly through the closet for towels to cover myself, but finding only washcloths, I tear the shower curtain from its loops with two good pulls. On the shower wall hangs my old poster of Tom Seaver, from his chubby, Cincinnati Reds days. As a boy, I wouldn't get in the bathtub unless my father taped the poster one more time to the wall. Of course, with the humidity, it was always falling off. The poster was something else we left behind after my

father moved to Springfield, Missouri, and my mother and I to our apartment up the hill from the Chi-Chi's.

"Mr. Mirer?" Douglas says. "It's positively an emergency."

For some reason the idea of Douglas seeing my poster feels wrong to me. With one graceful tug, I pull it down from the wall and shove it into the towel closet. Then I toss my shower curtain toga-style over my shoulder, bunching it up over my groin so nobody will notice.

After Douglas comes into the bathroom, I slip back into my bedroom, hoping to find some new clothes, but instead my mother's in there bent over my bed, untucking the sheets, which makes me nervous. What if my old *Hustler* magazines are still down there? What if those sheets are still stained?

"Relax, Mom," I say. "Don't do anything."

"I'm not doing anything," she says. "This is what not doing anything looks like."

Back in the screening room, there's an ominous clap of laughter, and I have to go check on it.

My father's up to my teenage years, which explains the laughter.

"He was a fine soccer player with a good left leg," my father says, "but he wanted challenges and so he played baseball, a sport where his lung capacity didn't help him. Andrea and I both thought he shouldn't play baseball. But he didn't need our advice."

"I had a good arm," I protest, but Mrs. Harden scowls at me and jots something on her clipboard. I have to raise my hand to talk.

"Can I talk to you privately?" I ask my father. As he and I walk to the bathroom, I hear the children behind me whispering, "Who's Andrea?"

When I open the door to the bathroom, Andrea's looking into

the mirror, patting powder over a zit on her forehead. I close the door, hoping she hasn't seen me.

"Coward," my father says.

"It's not your life," I say.

"This life isn't your life, either. It belongs to somebody else, somebody dumber than you, and you've stolen it so that you don't have to bother with your real life."

"What happened to all those compliments you were telling the students?"

"That was a different audience." We hear some grumbling from the living room. "They're waiting for me."

When I walk back into the screening room, they're all staring at me. Mrs. Harden. Shanna. Douglas. The blond-haired girls who adore Shanna. All of them. Getting stared at is worse than watching this awful documentary. "Everybody hush now," I say, repeating one of Mrs. Harden's lines. "It's time to be serious." Then I sit deep in my chair, pressing my hands to my face so no one can see me.

The documentary shows pictures of Andrea in bathing suits, in prom dresses, in blue slacks, and then strange, empty photographs of the bedroom in my mother's apartment, of my Tempo, of a state park picnic table, of the hospital parking lot. I can't keep from staring, remembering.

"They did it here," my father says, tapping the screen. The picture changes. "They did it here," he says. "He was brave enough to say all those things and do all those things in all those places and still not marry her. Lots of people would have felt obligated by their promises, by the way he used her, but not Mr. Mirer. He's too courageous to be trapped by anything. Now turn to page two of your handout." Papers shuffle.

On the screen my father shows a picture of Andrea sitting in our college health clinic. By herself. A magazine open across her lap.

"He was so clear in his morals that he would not stoop to soil himself with birth control, with medical opinions, with comfort during infections, but instead kept himself above it, entertaining himself with video games while his girlfriend sat alone in a doctor's office."

Now all the children turn away from my father. They kneel on their seats, pressing their chins against the padded chair tops, staring at me. They've decided it's time for me to respond, but I can't speak. My teeth are locked together, my tongue heavy as cement. Mrs. Harden has her clipboard ready; Shanna is asking me a question I can't hear. Douglas is raising his hands, signaling that once again he needs to go to the bathroom. Since Mrs. Harden won't recognize him, Douglas finally forgets about permission and sneaks down the hall to the bathroom, to the bathroom where Andrea is waiting for me. I chase after him, but he gets there before I can catch him.

"Don't worry about her," I say.

"Worry about who?" he says. The bathroom's empty; I start to breathe again.

"Mr. Mirer, what is this field trip supposed to teach us?" he asks. He's one of those gentle boys who understands teachers aren't machines. "If the next trip is about Mrs. Harden's life, I'm staying home."

"I don't know why we're here."

"You're supposed to know. You're also supposed to be wearing pants."

I look down again. "Shit," I say.

"You're also not supposed to cuss," he says and closes the door.

Luckily my father's bedroom door is open, so I run in there and close the door behind me. Andrea is lying on my parents' bed, a blue blanket pulled up to her chin, her white arms spread over the pillows. "Come in," she says.

"You've got to get out of here," I say. "They'll see you."

"If you don't want to see me, then why are you so excited?"

"I'm not excited."

"Look down," she says.

"That's not excitement. That's something else."

There's a knock on the door, my mother's voice. "Shit," I say. "Help me find some clothes." Dutifully, Andrea grabs slacks and a collared shirt, matching shoes and socks, a brown leather belt. The more she helps me, the angrier I get. When she tries to thread my belt through my slacks, I push her hand away. "I can do it," I say. My mother is still knocking on the door.

"I'm coming," I say. After Andrea ducks under the sheets, I open the door. Along with my mother, there's a mob of children in the hallway, pressing into the room, pointing at Andrea, pointing at me. From far down the hall, I hear my father and Mrs. Harden calling them back. "The show isn't over," they say, but the children keep asking questions. What am I doing? Why am I still naked? "Explain," they say. "Explain."

Caught in this mass of words, I hear my mother say something cutting about Andrea's fashion sense, and Andrea responds by insulting my mother's cooking. They're bickering back and forth, trying to pin me to different targets on the same board. The only thing I can do is run past them down the hall and through the screening room, where my father and Mrs. Harden and Shanna and Douglas are looking at a picture of me on the television, a picture of me on the school bus, a picture taken earlier this morning as

we drove to my father's house. I'm leaning against the window, my eyes closed. Shanna is looking back at me from her row; Douglas is sitting on the seat beside me. In the picture my arms are crossed over my chest. I'm wearing clothes, thank God. The children in the hallway ask me to explain.

"Ask him," I say, pointing at my father. "It's his show."

"It's boring," they say. "Tell us." In the hallway behind them, my mother and Andrea are arguing bitterly with each other about my physical health.

Outside there's air, cold and cutting, and I gulp it as I run through the yard. When I reach the street, I stop, unsure where to go next. Douglas is walking across the lawn toward me, carrying a folded-up piece of paper in his hands.

"Mrs. Harden wrote this for you," he says. Instead of reading it, I throw it on the ground. "Cool," he says.

"What do they want from me?" I say.

"They want to understand. They don't even know who you are."

"They don't care who I am. They don't even listen to what I say when we're in class." They come running down the steps, children first, adults behind them. Mrs. Harden scratching notes on her clipboard. Shanna asking questions I can't hear. My mother wagging her finger at Andrea. Andrea wagging her finger at my mother. Behind them my father is waving his arms, trying for attention.

"Let's run," I say, and Douglas and I take off across the street. As I look over the houses on our block, it occurs to me that our old neighbors—the real ones, the retired firemen and schoolteachers who lived there when I was a boy—are all dead.

"You need to put on some clothes," Douglas says.

"I am wearing clothes," I say. I touch my chest. "Shit. I have got

to stop this." The two of us bound up the nearest house's porch steps and press the bell until an Asian man opens the door. He's wearing a blue Oxford shirt, khaki pants, a hat advertising a car dealership. When he sees us, he yells something unintelligible; we hear pounding footsteps. A pudgy Asian boy in a sweat suit jogs down the stairs.

"I need some clothes," I say.

The man and the boy say laughably complex things to each other. Talking faster and more intelligently than I ever could. If I could say anything with that much assurance, I would surely be a happier person. The man says something that sounds like "*konizipachen*." The boy says, "*Howzibatsu*." I have the feeling they're talking about me in an unflattering way.

"Clothes," I say, pointing at the mob of children running toward us. "I need clothes." While his father blusters on, the boy grabs a purple robe for me from the hall closet. It's a beautiful, shimmering thing that falls lightly around my shoulders, its smoothness gliding over my skin. Beside me Douglas Patton is sliding into a large orange robe. The extra fabric pools glowingly at his feet. After we are properly attired, the boy says, "Sorry. We are eating turkey. It is a bad time." The door closes.

Now everyone is standing a few feet beneath us in the neighbor's yard. They look to be beyond quieting, but when Douglas raises his right hand, Mrs. Harden and Shanna and my mother and Andrea all follow suit, raising their own hands, calling for quiet. Soon everyone is silent. Everyone is waiting for me, fanning themselves with those awful handouts. And at this moment I would like to oblige them, to be profound and exculpatory, but I can't. While I stammer, my father bounds up on stage and starts introducing me, explaining that the documentary's montage ended precisely at this

moment of free choice, when I can decide what direction the story will follow. He's blathering, hogging attention.

"Talk," Douglas whispers to me. "You're supposed to teach them something."

"I don't know what to say."

There's a single, awful moment then, while Mrs. Harden lowers her hand and begins to write on her clipboard, while my father continues talking, while my mother and Andrea resume their argument, while Douglas pounds his head with his fist, muttering, "Think, think." Then he whispers to me, "*Konizipachen*."

"What?"

"*Konizipachen*," he says, pointing at the crowd. "Say, '*Howzibatsu*,'" he whispers. "I say, '*Konizipachen*.' You say, '*Howzibatsu*.'"

"*Konizipachen*," he says to the crowd.

"*Howzibatsu*," I say dumbly. I step forward, nudging my father off the porch.

"*Marzusikibad*," Douglas says. I mumble, struggling over what to say next. "Say anything," he reminds me.

"*Marenship hibitersen*." I say it loud. The sound makes me giggle.

Then Douglas starts to say something, a full sentence of silliness, a sentence that wraps around us both like a robe, soothing us, a sentence that would make sense of all of this if I could ever decipher it, but since I don't have time for puzzles, I start talking, too, cutting him off before he runs out of breath, before the silence can hurt us. And I say my sentence, a sentence from far in my past, a sentence of nonsense, a sentence like I've never said before.

A Comparative History of Nashville Love Affairs

EVERY THURSDAY my wife, Embee, and I eat lunch together in my Town Car. We park by the Cumberland River, or on top of Love Circle, or in Centennial Park and eat turkey-and-cheddar sandwiches wrapped in wax paper. Six years ago, when our daughter, Rebecca, entered high school and started chasing boys, Embee and I began meeting like this, to give us a chance to talk privately about Rebecca's behavior. Within a year Rebecca calmed down, and later she graduated and enrolled in Sewanee, where she is now a sophomore, but Embee and I continue to have lunch. These days we usually talk about our work and our friends and our plans to retire to Grayton Beach in Florida.

Last Thursday, Embee and I were driving past the old Peabody Dem School, Rebecca's former school, on our way to the park,

when Embee said, "Am I crazy or is there a man sitting in the playground?"

What she said scared me. Now that my daughter's in college, I have to worry about other people's daughters. I slowed the car. There, sitting on the grass was a gray-haired man wearing a red tie.

"Jesus Christ," I said. "It's Rudy." Rudy runs a workout center in Dickson. He's short and argumentative and once accidentally knocked my mailbox over when he was backing out of our driveway. His wife and mine are friends from Harpeth Hall, and we trade dinners every month.

"What's he doing?" Embee said. I turned into the parking lot. We were both staring at Rudy, trying not to think too much. I hated thinking; I had to talk.

"I ever tell you I used to drive over and watch Rebecca during recess? When she was a little girl. I used to know the way she skipped. Now I know more about the mayor's life than I do about hers."

"She's living her own life now," Embee said. "She's twenty years old, you know." I nodded. From the school's red brick building came a stream of third graders, led at the front by a chubby woman in a loose yellow sweater.

"There's Michelle," Embee said. Michelle is Rudy's wife. She teaches at the old Peabody Dem, which I had momentarily forgotten. "Rudy's waiting for her. That's sweet." Just like that, it was settled for her. For a moment she had worried that her friend's husband was a pervert, and now that he wasn't, she didn't have to think anything about it anymore.

"Well, what do you think he's doing?" I said.

"Aren't we going to eat lunch? You know I have to be back to the office by one."

"I just want to watch," I said. Embee took my sandwich from the bag, unfolded the wax paper, and passed it to me. I placed it in my lap. Then Embee did the same with hers. We were sitting there, watching.

Michelle led her class to the playground, where they climbed anything that could be climbed. Always there were four or five children near her, pulling on the sleeves of her sweater, tapping her shoulder with their hands. One boy challenged her to race, and she set off running across the soccer field, her sweater shifting over her frame like a flag in the wind. After she lost the race, she and the boy high-fived and walked back to the playground. Rudy was watching all of this, and writing down notes in a little pocket pad with a green cover. Michelle glanced at him once, frowning, but spent the rest of the time talking to her students. I opened my door.

"What are you going to say?" Embee asked.

"I don't know." When I reached Rudy, he slipped his notebook and his ballpoint pen into his coat pocket.

"How you doing, boy?" I said.

"Better than I deserve," he said. Out on the soccer field, Michelle was sitting down, and a child was standing behind her, his arms wrapped around her neck. Another was on her lap, and three more were on the grass, listening to her. She looked up at me and swung her hand through the air, a movement halfway between a wave and a dismissal.

"What are you doing?" I said.

Rudy spoke without looking back at me. "They love her. They fucking adore her." His hands were balled in fists. He was tapping them against his knee. I looked at Michelle again. I dragged my foot across the pavement.

Back in the car Embee asked me what was going on. "They aren't

splitting up again, are they?" I slammed the door shut. She said, "Well?" and we sat there.

Recess ended, and Michelle led her students back to class. Rudy waved to us awkwardly as he walked to his car. After he drove away, I looked over at Embee, for as long as I could, which wasn't very long at all. Everyone says Embee's beautiful—short blond hair, pale cheeks, thin red lips—but looking at her can be like looking at a church's stained glass window. I know there's a lot of details worth noticing, but all that registers with me is the general effect. Another class walked onto the playground, and I couldn't help but look away, to watch the kids.

"Why were you looking at me so strangely?" she said. "What did Rudy tell you?"

"Everything's fine," I said.

"Oh," she said in her disappointed, disapproving way. I turned on the radio—a Vince Gill song.

"TV said he's divorcing," I said. "Vince Gill."

"Oh," she said again. I dropped her off at work. Neither of us had touched our turkey sandwiches. On my way to my office I stopped at a barbecue stand and I bought two pork shoulder sandwiches and I ate them until I was sick.

I'm a reader. Sometimes I read about other people's lives and I wonder. I recently read about Andrew Jackson and his wife, Rachel. As most people know, they got married before Rachel had divorced her first husband. Later, before he was elected president, Jackson killed a man who insulted Rachel's honor.

Sometimes, when I'm bored at the agency, I think about what the wedding must have been like. The two of them in a little wooden chapel. A fire burning logs behind the altar, crackling and spitting. Horses and a carriage tied out front. The preacher stopping in the

middle, asking Jackson if he was sure. Maybe Jackson let go from her hand, for a moment, and thought about the pain she caused him, the hours he wasted wondering about her previous husband. Maybe then he took her hand again, held it palm up to the thick wooden crossbeam on the ceiling, and folded it into his fist. I think about this, and I think about my own wedding—where Embee's mother tied African violets to every pew of the church and placed a bouquet of mums near the altar. At times I felt like one of the flowers, something to stand there and make the picture complete.

I like to think sometimes about the pain Andrew Jackson must have felt. The way he must have turned around, terribly, whenever someone giggled. Every day, the pain must have been solid and sour as a sliced lime tucked inside his cheek. When he ate at the pain, it must have flooded his mouth, chewed at every sore his nervous teeth gnawed inside his lips, must have reminded him always that he loved her.

The next morning, Friday, I was lying in bed beside Embee, thinking silly, half-asleep thoughts about Rudy, who hadn't always had the best marriage with Michelle. At least once he was caught running around on her. Twice they separated. And now there he was in the playground, leaning against the chain-link fence, writing down every move she made, adoring her. It wasn't fair. Embee and I had the happy marriage. I deserved to be the one eyeballing my wife in public, embarrassing her. That was what I should have felt. But I didn't.

I kissed Embee's shoulder. She was wearing blue silk pajamas. I kissed her again. I liked kissing her when she was asleep. I liked looking at her closed eyes. She woke up and kissed me back. When she started to unbutton my shirt, I backed away. It felt wrong, like I

didn't feel enough to let her kiss me. Like I was using her, cheating her. "I didn't mean to wake you," I said.

"I'm up now," she said.

"Want some coffee?" Of course she didn't. When I came back to the bedroom, she was sitting up, leaning against the headboard. There was a book in her lap—a biography of Eleanor Roosevelt. She was wearing her reading glasses.

I started on *Legends of Nashville*, a book about plantation owners and their wives, local ghost stories. The book was very precise; it told exactly where each story took place and how to get there driving today's streets. Some of the stories took place a mile or two from our house, down Old Hickory Boulevard. I liked that. It made the drama seem not so far away.

I took my wife's hand. We sat like that, side by side, reading, as the sun lightened our curtains. After a few minutes, she let go of my hand and licked her finger and turned the page. Then she let her hand fall back to the sheet, back into mine.

At noon I picked Embee up at her office. She was surprised to see me, and she protested that she was too busy to leave.

"I'm never going to get these reports done," she said. "You're going to be throwing these reports into my coffin after me."

"I don't think you're ready for the gravedigger yet," I said. We argued in this sarcastic way until the partner she works for walked past and, recognizing me, told Embee, "Go ahead with your husband. We'll survive for an hour without you." Being bossed hurt her feelings—if she'd been born twenty years later, Embee would be a partner, not a partner's assistant. When she came back from the bathroom, we left.

"What is your big plan anyway?" she said. I didn't say.

All morning, I had driven around Nashville, searching my mind to come up with some way to show something to her—and to myself. The best idea I could think of was the Parthenon. It was someplace we had been, but still someplace unusual. It did not take me long to work out an arrangement with the security guard. I told him I might embarrass myself, but I wasn't going to hurt anybody, and he nodded.

I drove to the Parthenon, parked by the pond. Inside the naos there's a forty-two-foot gypsum cement and chopped fiberglass statue, *Athena Parthenos.* The real daddy over in Athens, the ruined one, which Embee and I visited two years ago, to celebrate our daughter going to college, doesn't have its statue anymore.

Everywhere except her feet, the goddess is strange, like one of those lifeless woodcut dolls with the huge, empty eyes. But her feet, that's what's alive. Not because they're small and delicate, like my wife's bird bones. No, it's because the toenails, carved smooth over the toes, tuck perfectly into the skin. Because of the slight ripple behind the toenails where the knuckle begins. That's where you can tell a man made this statue for a woman.

I told Embee to climb up on the five-foot marble pedestal. She got a handhold on the top of the foot and pulled herself onto the statue's right big toe. My eyes were even with Embee's ankles. It was strange to look up at her, after all those years of being taller. I noticed the faint tips of light on her thin mustache, the tiny hairs inside her nose, the mole under her chin that I saw only when I kissed her neck.

Behind one of the columns, I'd stashed a cigar tin, a book of matches, scissors, that morning's *Tennessean*, black dress socks, my driver's license. My plan was to light it all on fire inside the

tin, and hand the whole deal up to her. I wasn't sure what this would accomplish, but I was sure it would accomplish something. It would send her a message. I shuffled the cigar tin and heard the scissors clink against the sides. I tried to put all my thoughts out of my mind.

I snapped a match against the cover and lit the newspaper. Then I cut my driver's license in two and sheared the dress socks. Embee wasn't smirking; she was down on her knees, peering into the tin I was holding, trying to see what was inside. She was trying to count everything inside the tin, to make it all add up. "I don't understand," she said. "Those are your new black socks."

"It doesn't mean anything. Don't look that way." I looked down at the burning newspaper. This wasn't any more loving than anything I'd done before. Just dumber.

So I ran. Dropped the tin and heard it twang against the floor. Halfway out, I felt the matches in my hand and dropped them, too. Behind the Parthenon, there's a muddy pond, full of ducks, and I sat on a rock there. Across from me an old man in a porter's hat was fishing. I heard Embee's heels on the asphalt.

"Leonard," she said. God, she sounded like my mother, my schoolteacher, my pastor, anybody except my wife when she said my name that way. But I'd given her cause. "The guard had to help me down. I left your props behind. Except for your driver's license. I can put it together with some tape."

"I know," I said. I nubbed a pebble from the dirt, tossed it into the water.

"Good Lord," my wife said. She sat down beside me. I still couldn't look at her. So I threw another pebble. This time she followed suit. We did this for a while, until the fisherman in his

porter's hat reeled in and hiked over to the other end of the lake. She tossed a rock in the muddy water. I tried to put mine in the exact same spot.

When I first moved to Nashville from Elizabethtown, Kentucky, Embee was a senior at Vanderbilt. She was more serious than the other girls—certain she would get a job outside of the house, interested in the world beyond Nashville, willing to date someone as awkward and uncitified as I was. But still I was nervous. Back then I used to drive to her parents' house in Belle Meade just to watch the cars come in and out of their driveway. I felt then that if I married her, I would enter a new world, and I wanted to know what it looked like. Embee, I guess, felt the opposite way—that she would enter my world—though I was too foolish to understand it at the time. I owned only one blazer—a brown Sunday special—and soon after we married, I received a promotion and spent it all on business clothes. Ties and shirts and suits. Back home Embee pulled my old brown coat from the trash can and stroked its sleeve. "That's the coat you wore when I fell in love with you," she said. I started then to understand that our marriage did not mean me entering her world, or her entering mine, but the two of us creating a new one for ourselves. I kept the coat for a year or two; then I threw it away.

During the time we were dating, the most prominent man in Nashville—with the possible exception of Roy Acuff—was Governor Frank Goad Clement. He was the keynote speaker at the Democratic National Convention. He ended all his speeches with a line from the old gospel song, "Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on." And everyone knew he was playing around on his wife. Embee said a few of her friends—Vanderbilt girls—had dated him. Often

I wondered if she had dated him herself. That was how I pictured her—with a governor, not with a small-town boy like me.

Later that year, Governor Clement—then in the middle of a run for the U.S. Senate—died in a car accident on Franklin Road. I was young enough to be happy about this news, relieved that this man I had never met could no longer be a rival. But since then I have thought more often about the circumstances of his death. Governor Clement was driving to see his mistress when he died. But his mistress was not a Vanderbilt coed. His mistress was a woman his own age, the widow of Hank Williams.

Sometimes still I picture the two of them in bed together, her pillows and blankets all crumpled and defeated on the rug on the floor. An empty king-size mattress covered with a sky blue sheet, the two of them spread out on opposite sides, touching only where his ankle sat on top of hers.

"Come on, tell me this once, wasn't it the best?" Clement says. "Has anyone else ever made you do that way?"

"I don't vote," she says. "I leave that to writers."

"Writers," he says, distracted, angry for a moment. Then he cools, rolls to her, and clamps his hand over her stomach. It sags a little, like an old purse. She is heavy with time. He likes it, the sag. And yes, Clement thinks, dreaming himself to sleep in her bed, which was once Hank's bed, that this woman is a charm who carries, in a film over and inside her body, Hank's skin of greatness, and can pass it on to him, a sliver at a time, and he can fix that greatness over his own mortal body, if he only rubs against her hard enough.

After the Parthenon fiasco, I drove us home. Embee did not go back to work. I headed right to the bathroom. By the time I crapped my

nerves out and washed my hands, Embee was lying naked on our red sheets. One hand between her head and the pillow. The other covering herself. She was as long and skinny as ever. And she was waiting for me. Knowing I didn't deserve to touch her made me want to touch her so bad.

When we were done, my wife was breathing slow on my white chest hairs. If I was half what I should be, I would have been sleeping beside her. But I wasn't. I saw Rudy again, leaning against the fence, writing down everything he saw. What did he write? What was he so anxious to see?

I walked back to the bathroom and washed my hands just so I could feel the cold. Embee came up behind me. Put her hands on my sides. Pressed her lips into my spine. I felt the buzz of her words in the bones of my back.

"Just tell me," she said. But I couldn't open my mouth. You can't tell someone you don't love them as much as you should, as much as you want to. Soon as you say that, they're gone thinking you don't love them at all, don't want to be with them. What you say and what they think you mean are not the same. So you can't say anything at all.

Embee reached her arms around my stomach. While she held me that way, she whispered, over and over again into my spine, "It's alright. It's alright. It's alright."

Every time she spoke, she sent a little shiver through me. Every time I felt a little more alone. I didn't want to be loved, not right then. Being loved made it all worse.

The phone rang. Embee gave me one kiss on the back before she picked it up.

"Yes?" she said. It hurt me a little, she went back to her phone

voice so quick. "Rebecca?" With that one word, her voice changed temperature. "Don't be silly. I'm glad you called."

I pulled on my pants and my shoes. Embee placed her palm over the speaker.

"You going out?" she said. She was looking at me sadly, and pressing the phone to her ear, and nodding her head, all at once.

"I guess."

"Rebecca wants to talk to you."

"Tell her I'll call her back." Before Embee could say anything else, I was gone.

When Rebecca was ten or eleven, Metro Nashville had a mayor named Bill Boner. And being how kids are, my daughter loved to burst in on me in the trash room while I was watching the television news and say, all spit and giggles, "How's your Mayor Boner tonight? Huh?" A week straight she did it. Each time I just repeated what the news said. And after a week, she gave up on her joke.

Mayor Boner's name fit his life, I guess. Near the end of his term, he left his wife for an aspiring country singer named Traci Peel. The television news used to broadcast pictures of him at the seediest bars in Nashville, standing behind her on a small raised stage, playing his harmonica. He was the city's laughingstock. People wore T-shirts that said "Dick Traci—Boner Did."

Once, when my daughter was playing solitaire on the living room floor, and my wife was reading novels on the couch, a TV news program showed a hidden-camera clip of the mayor in one of those clubs. The picture was grainy and blocked in part by the

drooping heads of the bar patrons and a large sign that said "It's Always Miller Time." The mayor was playing harmonica, cheeks puffed, sweat streaming. His blond girlfriend was singing too loudly into the microphone. As the reporter pulled the camera from its hiding place and marched up on the mayor, Boner's face grew bigger and bigger on the screen. The mayor got all Nixon-serious for a minute. He dropped his harmonica into his pocket, and then he slid one hand through Traci's dyed blond hair and raised the other to his cheek, where he circled his thumb and his index finger into the okay sign.

It didn't matter that the mayor and Traci broke up, that the mayor was now no longer mayor but a radio talk show host, that all of it ended up trashy and lurid. I still remember that moment. Rebecca and Embee had put away their cards and their novels for a moment and were watching with me.

"What a jackass," Rebecca said as the TV news clicked to a soap commercial.

"Rebecca?" Embee said.

"What a moron, then. Is that better?"

"Ask your father."

"Yes, honey. That's better." That was all I said.

After I left our house, I drove around until it was dark. The song on the radio made me angry, so I turned it off. I remember eating Little Debbie's Swiss Cake Rolls and drinking RC, but mostly I was just waiting. Once it was evening, I drove to White Bluff, to the little farm Rudy and Michelle share.

Around the corner from their house, I cut my car to neutral and rolled into a small dirt turnoff, behind some shrubs. I lowered my window, so I could hear. From where I parked, I saw the side of

their white farmhouse pocked with dark windows. Rudy sat on the porch, his feet up against the screen, a glass in his hand, staring at the yard. There were two chicken coops backed up against the house. If you stood between the two chicken coops, no one in the house could see you. That's where Michelle was, holding a bag of feed in one hand. She hauled some feed out of the bag, skipped it inside one of the coops. Even from the road, I could hear those chickens balking and scurrying.

"Michelle?" Rudy yelled. "Need some help out there? I'll put on my shoes."

"Give me a minute, will you?" she said.

"I can't see you."

"I'm not going to run away," she said. "I'll be inside in a second."

"I'm putting on my shoes." Rudy was bent over in his chair.

Michelle sat down on her bag of feed, looking out at the road. She rubbed her fingers over her temples, like people do for a headache. When Rudy walked up behind her, she did not turn to him. He placed his hands on her shoulder and left them there until she shrugged them off. There was a look in her face I could recognize—she wasn't angry or hateful, she was just tired. Rudy stood behind her, his hands hanging at his sides. He was chewing his lip. Crazy thoughts flitted through me—that Embee and I were mis-married. That I would never give Embee what she wanted, that Michelle would never give Rudy what he wanted. That everything was hopeless.

Rudy touched her shoulder again, first her left, then her right. This time she didn't flinch. She sat there, still as a stone, and his hands crept up her neck to her forehead, where he began rubbing her temples. Michelle was very patient. Finally she reached forward

and touched his cheek. I saw Rudy's face, its eagerness. I had to look away.

"Poor Rudy," I said. "Poor Michelle. Poor Embee. Poor me. Poor Rebecca."

I didn't really feel sorry for myself. Actually I felt happy. It's a shame that another person's pain makes your own easier to take. But it's true.

I closed my eyes and waited until I heard the screen door slam shut. Then I reversed out of the dirt-road turnoff and turned back to Nashville.

Indoor Plumbing

THE SUMMER CHARLIE TURNED TWELVE, he spent a month with his grandfather in central Kentucky. His mother told Charlie it was because of the heat, because their little apartment in Ann Arbor, Michigan, wasn't air-conditioned, but secretly she hoped a month there would help him understand why she left Kentucky in the first place. The last few months, Charlie had started asking her so many questions about her childhood on that farm, as if he were nostalgic for a life he had never had, a life that in her mind had been more irritating than romantic. Some evenings she drove him through the college campus just so he could see the black boys and white girls holding hands. "And there's nothing wrong with that, is there, Charlie?" she asked. She wasn't listening for an answer; she was gesturing, cutting the air with her right

hand, talking to herself. The same gestures she made that August as she drove away from her father's house, as Charlie and the old man stood on the porch waving good-bye to her.

Charlie's grandfather rented out his farm now and lived off his social security and his rent checks in a small, blue house in the county seat. The old man, remembering his daughter's disdain for crops and farm implements, ignored Charlie's questions, answering the boy with jokes and riddles. "The best plow to have is your neighbor's," he'd say. "That way you don't have to fix it when it breaks." Instead of the horse rides and sweet corn he'd expected, Charlie got a summer of two-hand pinochle and bacon sandwiches and Cincinnati Reds games on the AM radio. It was a disappointment to the boy, and he got quieter by the day. The two barely spoke, though they spent every hour together, pulling weeds in the garden during the morning, playing cards and listening to the radio in the afternoon. When the Reds weren't on, they listened to a country station that announced the hometown of each singer before playing his song. All the singers were from Kentucky, it seemed like, and Charlie asked his grandfather to drive him to some of those towns. Eddyville or Russellville or Salt Creek.

"Can't take you to Eddyville," his grandfather said. "Closed down last year when the last person left." Knowing he was being teased, Charlie turned back to his cards, thumping his nine down hard on the table like his grandfather did. Without knowing it, he had picked up many of his grandfather's habits. He stroked the soft part of his belly after he ate. When he was thinking, he rubbed his neck with the back of his wrist.

Every Thursday they ate lunch at the Junction Café, where the owner wrote their order on a green pad, and a black boy wearing a white apron filled their water glasses. The last time they went

there, Charlie's grandfather told him something surprising. After the boy poured their water, Charlie's grandfather wiped the rim of his glass with a napkin, then took a drink.

"See water, make water," his grandfather said, rubbing his big stomach.

Charlie didn't have to pee but he followed his grandfather anyway. It was a small bathroom—one stall and one urinal—and Charlie's grandfather went into the stall. His pee made an enviable, throttling sound in the bowl. Charlie was standing before the urinal, but nothing was coming.

"You don't really pee in that thing, do you?" His grandfather came out from the stall, his white boxer shorts showing behind his undone zipper. "Where you think that black boy out there goes pee?" Charlie didn't answer. "He goes right here, you know. And, if you go there and he goes there, then your pee and his gets mixed up together in the piping. Black and white pee together don't make gray pee, they make some kind of acid that turns the water to vinegar. And then that's the water you drink. That's why they used to have different bathrooms. And that's why today you'll see the black people at the urinal, and us folks behind the stall. To keep things working right for both sides."

Charlie couldn't tell if his grandfather was joking or not. "I've seen people up in Michigan peeing in the urinal," Charlie said. "White people."

"Well, white people in Michigan will do any damn thing, won't they?"

Charlie stayed at the urinal, intending to pee right then in front of his grandfather, but he couldn't, not while he was being watched. When they walked back to the dining room, Charlie stared over at the black boy pouring water into glasses at another table. Charlie

felt thick and itchy like he had to go to the bathroom. He rubbed his belly to distract himself. Later, after his grandfather paid the bill, Charlie walked back to the bathroom and peed proudly in the urinal. He didn't tell his grandfather.

But when Charlie returned to Michigan in September, he gradually started using the stalls. One day he saw two boys fighting savagely in the locker room and he went into the stall and latched it and sat there a while. One day he spent an entire class period in the stall, just sitting and thinking. That fall his grandfather was sick and sounded weak over the telephone. Peeing in the stall became a way of remembering the old man, of pretending he had learned more than he actually had. Then it was just a habit.

It was never something he talked about, not until years later, when his wife asked him a question about his grandfather. He and his wife were eating enchiladas at a Mexican chain restaurant in South Bend, Indiana. Telling it pleased him; the brevity of his relationship with the old man made it sweeter in retrospect, and he knew his grandfather's life would be surprising to his wife, who had grown up in a practical, Catholic home in Northbrook, Illinois. As he spoke, he dipped his cloth napkin in his water glass and scrubbed his fork with it. He realized that the story annoyed her, but he kept telling it anyway. Just because she was from the Midwest didn't mean she had the right to feel superior to his grandfather.

"My brothers would drop dead before they'd pee in the stall," she said. "Two of them had urinals installed in their home bathrooms just so they can hang loose. And you really wait in line for the stall, just to keep from using the urinal?"

"Not always." He scratched his cheek. "There's baseball games. There's concerts. There's times when it's an emergency."

She picked a tortilla chip off the plate, looked at it, then put it

down. "You know that black people use the stalls too, don't you?" He nodded. "And you know there's only one pipe down there, right? That no matter what you do in the sink or the stall or the urinal, it all goes to the same place. The water and the pee and everything."

"And the dirt under our feet is the same, but that doesn't mean you want to live next door to them, does it?"

"That's just safety and good sense. This is shit and piss and craziness."

He didn't like anything about this conversation, not the words she used, not the things he was saying. He chewed on the inside of his cheek, a small consolation; he looked at his hands. "I'll stop," he said. "We won't ever have to talk about it again."

"That wouldn't stop you from thinking it. Stopping now wouldn't even matter."

But it did. He got up to go to the bathroom and he peed in the urinal. "I did it," he said when he came back. She said she didn't want to hear about it, but she had relaxed. She ordered a margarita. He did, too. "My grandfather loved to listen to the Cincinnati Reds," he said. "My grandfather loved bacon."

"Everybody loves bacon," she said, trying to reassure him.

For a while he thought that peeing in the urinal might help that other thing go away—that urge he had to urinate whenever he saw a black person—but it didn't. Gradually, as he noticed people's stares, he stopped rubbing his belly in public. Now he chewed the inside of his cheek whenever he needed to distract himself, whenever he saw a black person, whenever he had to pee. He chewed his cheek until it was sore and stringy, until he could taste the blood underneath, until the pain and its little pleasure were the only things he could feel, until his grandfather—and whatever black people happened to be nearby—walked out of the room.

Freedom Rides

CECILIA DIDN'T WANT TO GET ON MY BUS. This was even before the field trip started. All fifty-five seventh graders—Cecilia's, Mrs. Sampson's, and mine—were sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk. Three squirming rows of collared blue shirts and cotton blouses, of tan slacks and pleated skirts, of fifty-five different masks for impatience. It was three days before spring break. In the middle row Cecilia was passing M&M's to her students. My ranks grumbled; I didn't have shit to give a manure salesman. As she reaches each kid, Cecilia drops into a catcher's squat, governing her weight with the balls of her feet. Waiting. When they look at her, she shows a smile as brief and blinding as a camera's flash, she whispers the student's name. Hello, Jeffrey. A new smile for each person. "Cast, don't troll," she tells me when I'm lazy with my kids. "They want to know you're looking at them." I don't argue with her. I don't listen

either. Now she's standing in front of me, tall and casual in baggy shorts and Velcro sandals. I tap her painted toenails.

"Any M&M's for the teacher?" I ask.

"Check my purse." There's one bag for each student in my class. Exactly.

"Good deal," I say, but already she's squatting down to the next student. Her bottom teeth are crooked. She only shows the top ones when she smiles.

I toss the candy to my students. "Hey, Norris," I say. "Rise and shine."

When we're in bed, just talking, not doing anything, Cecilia says, "What if they know? They'll never listen to me again." No matter how many times I hear it, I hate that question. It's not like we have anything to hide. So I list the things they know. Who dissed who on *Felicity*. When to squeeze a zit. How to crash our school's Web site. They don't know about us.

"If I didn't think they were any smarter than that, I'd quit tomorrow," she says. "Everything's not a joke, you know."

"I know that," I say. "When did you ever hear me joke about us?"

She turns on the television. She doesn't care what she watches as long as the channel doesn't change. And she falls asleep, her hands still gripping the remote. I don't want to wake her up, so I learn how to stage garden parties, how to broil lamb chops, how to lure bloodstains from bedsheets. In the morning, she's awake before dawn, scared a carpool of kids might spot her walking down my front steps. Because I'm feigning sleep and not talking, she kisses my chin. Her wet hair smothers my face.

In front of us right now, two chartered buses puff exhaust across the school's parking lot. We're not the kind of school to own buses; our parents drop their kids in the morning and pick them up af-

ternoons. In nice cars. To my left, Mrs. Sampson, the seventh-grade lead teacher, is counting heads. She's wearing her field trip outfit—silky maroon sweat suit, borrowed PE whistle, bleached undershirt. She thinks she's everybody's mom. "Rambunctious, aren't they?" she says as she directs me to the nearest bus. Which is a nice way of saying shut them up. She moves on to Cecilia. Because I can't hear what they say, I piece together what happens next. Mrs. Sampson points Cecilia toward my bus. Instead of separating, they talk a minute, Cecilia cupping her hand over Mrs. Sampson's ear. When they part, Mrs. Sampson herds her students toward my bus; Cecilia takes the farther one.

At her bus, Cecilia pats the children on the head as they climb aboard. I don't pat anybody's head. I don't want anybody to pat my head. When Cecilia finally glances my way, I shrug my shoulders, asking why didn't she come on my bus? I don't ever let her think I don't notice. She climbs aboard without answering. The door closes behind her.

There's an empty seat in Mrs. Sampson's front row, but I mosey past her and drop down beside a blond-haired boy I don't know. The whole time he talks to me about skateboarding. I talk back. I make things up. How I broke my arm skateboarding when I was in seventh grade.

"Where'd you break it?" Jonathan says. I show him my left forearm.

"Cool," he says. "I think I can see the scar."

I don't correct him. I let him touch my arm. I keep silent the rest of the ride. For a while he keeps talking. Then he stares out the window.

"Who makes an attraction out of the Freedom Rides, anyway?" I ask. We're out to dinner in the city a week ago. Cecilia won't eat in

town. She's afraid someone will spot us. When she leans toward me, I catch sight of the purple rim of her sports bra under her blouse. I want her right then. It's a long drive back to our town. Thinking about it, I'm sad. Then I'm angry.

"Hush now," she says. She drags her roll across the plate, sponging the last of the marsala sauce. Eating makes her happy.

"Might as well take them to Disney World," I say.

From across the table, she reaches out to grab my hand. Her fingers are still sticky. "I'm going to the bathroom for just a minute," she says. "When I come back, can we please not talk about this? Plan your own trip if you want. But don't complain anymore. I have to get on that bus just like you do."

None of the men look up from their steaks when she walks past. Fools. Cecilia's sandals clomp against the floor. She's dense, literally. One evening, feeling playful, I wrapped my arms around her stomach and lifted. I couldn't budge her. But everybody who knows her loves her.

When she walks, her anklet jangles lightly against her left leg. I gave the anklet to her when we first started seeing each other. Sometimes I ask her not to take the anklet off. I crawl down the sheets and hold her foot to the light and stare at the measly gold, which could never look as right as her skin. I kiss her ankle. I look. I kiss her again. "Don't stop there," she says. "The ankle's not the only place you can kiss a girl." Because I can't close my ears, I close my eyes. We're not something to joke about.

From the outside Freedom Rides looks like a small city's aquarium—a squat cylinder painted sunshiny silver. An eight-foot chain-link fence surrounding it. The words "Freedom Rides" smudged in thick black letters on the wall. As we shepherd the kids from the bus, Mrs. Sampson tells me for the third time that an ex-schoolteacher

from up North developed the idea. Some backers from Florida gave him the money. He doesn't call it an attraction, she says. There aren't any roller coasters or monorails. He wants to call it a museum, but if they called it a museum only school groups would come.

"It goes to show you," Mrs. Sampson says. Her two grown sons buy farmland and turn it into shopping malls. She doesn't really believe men can be good teachers. When the kids gather, she speaks slowly. "Ladies and gentlemen, how are we supposed to behave?" That's how she talks: ladies and gentlemen. I don't believe she can be a good teacher. She's been teaching twenty-seven years.

While she ushers the kids toward the front gate, I bend over and start hacking out coughs. Two girls are tugging on Cecilia's sweater, but she turns from them, her sleeves slipping through their fingers. She's coming toward me, but I don't get to enjoy the moment. Jonathan, the skateboarder, gets to me first. He's yelling, "Mr. Breckston is choking," and pounds me on the back. You wouldn't think a ninety-pound boy could hit that hard. But he has good technique. He leaps into the air, gaining a solid ten-inch clearance, and drills my back on the way down to maximize the effect of gravity. The fourth hit drives me to my knees. Now they surround me. The kids and Mrs. Sampson and Cecilia.

"Are you okay?" Jonathan says. I nod. "I just saved Mr. Breckston's life," he announces. He leaps into the air like he just kicked the winning field goal. This is a bad development. The rest of the day he'll be on me like dirt on a worm. Cecilia mouths the same words to me. "Are you okay?" I'm ashamed. I'm frustrated. Girls tug on her sleeve. She turns to them. I brush gravel from my knees.

Our tour leader is a black guy from Connecticut, a little younger than us. His name is Tony. He's wearing a tan four-button vest, no

tie, mirror-polished shoes. Mrs. Sampson says she's happy the kids will be able to learn from him. She asks if he's taught before or led any tours. When he says no, Mrs. Sampson stands very close to him. She clinches the whistle in her teeth.

The world inside the water tank is divided in three parts, he tells us, to teach different lessons about civil rights. One of the rooms reconstructs Rosa Parks's bus ride, another the Greensboro sit-ins. On the last part of our trip, we're going to travel by boat from Chicago to Atlanta, from Selma to Starkville, all in thirty minutes.

"At least I hope so," he says. No one else laughs. On the way out the door, Tony tells me he's here on work-study from a small college in Vermont. When he showed up, he expected to meet the contractors. Instead he found a diagram, a set of encyclopedias, and a note addressed to the owner promising to sue if they didn't get their money soon.

"The only thing they finished was the water ride," Tony says. "The rest of it, I had to make up by myself. They wanted something more like a time line, what happened when, but I made a few changes."

Behind me, Mrs. Sampson and Cecilia are jotting on their clipboards, prepping their charts. This afternoon, they'll trim their notes to a single-page outline, photocopy sixty sheets to pass to the students tomorrow morning. Quiz on Friday. If either of them heard Tony's confession, we'd be back on the bus faster than Jack Sprat. When I was in college, it never occurred to me I would be the designated bad person.

"No problemo," I tell Tony.

Nothing too bad happens in the Rosa Parks Bus. We sit on hard bench seats. Tony waves a piece of yellow crime scene tape over his

head. “Wherever I put this tape will determine where you belong,” he says. “The people behind it will be black. The boys and girls in front will be white.” There’s a wave of laughter. The tape reads, “Cross Police Line Do Not.”

“That means you can’t pass this line no matter how crowded it gets,” he says when he places the tape on the floor. Then Tony starts walking the rows, demoting kids from the “white” section.

“I’m black?” Jonathan says when Tony taps him. “Just like that?”

“For now,” Tony says.

“Does that mean I get to wear your vest?” Jonathan asks. One thing about kids is they always want. You learn to say no. And no. And no. Tony hasn’t learned. He tries to reason, saying his vest won’t fit, but Jonathan keeps asking until Tony gives up. The vest hangs past Jonathan’s knees as he walks to the back. Already, five or six kids in the back are stepping on the yellow tape line, and the kids behind them keep pushing.

“Good demonstration,” Mrs. Sampson says. “Don’t you think so, Miss Atkins?”

“I think they’ve learned a lot,” Cecilia says. “Why don’t we wrap up?”

I don’t know how many times I’ve crumbled in front of the two of them when they gang together. Tony doesn’t. “The other rule is that people in the front can’t stand up or speak, whether they want to or not.” Which is enough to sit Mrs. Sampson down.

Tony is the last one to move toward the back. “This won’t be such a stretch for me,” he says. He slips his silver wristwatch into his pocket and heads straight into a stampede. Kids scramble over seats, kids duck between his legs. People are being stepped on. Someone is coughing. It has nothing to do with Rosa Parks or her story, but it’s instructive all the same. It’s chaos. When Mrs. Sampson finally

blows her whistle, the students slouch toward their seats. Some of them are bruised. Tony's vest is torn at the seams. Jonathan has to hold it together with his hands.

"It didn't fit me anyway," Tony tells him. Which is a lie. But a nice one.

Mrs. Sampson and Cecilia separate boys and girls into two lines outside the bus. Mrs. Sampson takes the boys, folding their hair back to look for scars or bruises. Cecilia has the girls. As they examine each kid, they call out names. "Lauren, she's just got a scratch," Cecilia says. "You're okay, aren't you sweetie?" "Michael here is clean as a whistle," Mrs. Sampson says. "Way to go, Michael." They talk so much because they are so worried. Tony sits down beside me in the bus's front row.

"If these kids didn't have so many people wiping their noses, they might actually be able to smell something," Tony says.

"No harm, no foul," I say. Outside the women continue to call back and forth. As they move down the line, farther from the bus, their voices become faint and puffy, like horns honked on lonely highways, signaling nothing more than the presence of another human being.

The Woolworth Sit-In Stage is worse. Here, Tony tells the students they're going to assume roles in the story. Girls stand behind the counter, boys mob outside the door, my skateboarder Jonathan and a few others sit in.

"Everybody talks about the courage it took to sit in," Tony says. "But it took courage to get angry, too. Did you ever think about that?"

Some students behind the door are thumb fighting. "Be nonviolent," Mrs. Sampson says.

"You can't learn how not to be angry until you've learned to be

angry," Tony says. One of the girls who has been doting on Cecilia wipes the counter with an imaginary washcloth. Jonathan is sitting on the swivel stool, twisting in his seat.

"Tell her you want a cheese sandwich," Tony says. Jonathan says it.

"Tell him you don't want to give him one." The girl repeats Tony's words. Things go on like this, Tony nudging them both, until Jonathan finally gets mad and starts yelling at the girl. Mrs. Sampson makes a move to break it up, but Tony stops her by holding up his hand. It's impressive. She wouldn't stop that way for me.

The other girls huddle behind the counter, all of them yelling at Jonathan now, and he climbs up on the stool to get at them. They grab him, dragging him onto the floor. I step into it, trying to pull them off Jonathan, then the boys outside the door rush past me, swarming the girls, kneeing them in their stomachs, protecting Jonathan. The girls fight back, kicking the boys in their shins. It's a battle of the sexes.

It takes all four of us adults to break them up. From the center of the fight, Mrs. Sampson and Cecilia haul the pugilists toward Tony and me. The two of us shepherd the boys and girls to opposite corners. Of course I position myself by Cecilia. Our hands touch momentarily on the boys' shoulders. If they fought all day, we'd never stop touching. That's what I think. I admit I'm a terrible person. In the middle of it all, as Mrs. Sampson and Cecilia reach for two more bodies, the fighting suddenly stops. The kids sit quietly on the floor. Like nothing happened.

Mrs. Sampson and Cecilia take turns lecturing them, threatening to take them home. They finally stop when Jonathan raises his hand. He's holding Tony's shredded vest in his fist.

"Miss Atkins, the Freedom Riders didn't give up the first time

they confronted trouble," he says. "When the mayor of Cincinnati tossed them into the Ohio River, they didn't sink. They swam. And when the police chief in Wilmington, Delaware, put them on a plane to Madrid, they didn't stay on board. They strapped on their parachutes and jumped out. They learned from their mistakes. Can't we?"

Cecilia and Mrs. Sampson are shaking their heads, whispering to each other; they don't know he's teasing. As Jonathan talks, he rubs his hand over his stomach, where the girls kicked him. In sympathy I rub my own rib cage. When he's done, he tosses me a grown-up's wink. It's like we're the only people in the room.

To give everybody a chance to think, we teachers send the students to eat their sack lunches. One at a time, Mrs. Sampson, Cecilia, and Tony make their way to me.

First Mrs. Sampson. "Would you tell Jonathan the truth about the Freedom Rides?" she says. "I didn't want to embarrass him in front of everybody else."

Then Cecilia. "Maybe you're right about them being dumb," she says. "Wilmington, Delaware?" I try to take advantage, touch her cheek. She uses her hands to block me.

Then Tony. "The Ohio River. I hope they found Muhammad Ali's gold medal while they were there. That's the only true thing I heard since I moved down here."

"It's not true," I say. "He was joking."

"That's what made it true. It was a joke, but it wasn't a lie."

We catalog the injured. After what I saw, I expect to be popping shoulders back into joints, setting bones, icing amputated thumbs. But nobody's really hurt, not even Jonathan. There are a few scraped shins, a scratched cheek, a bleeding finger, but nothing worse. One

of the girls who kicked Jonathan helps him apply his Band-Aid. "We weren't really fighting," she says to me. "We were reenacting history." She seems to believe it. They all do. Across the room, they're righting the overturned stools, propping up the lunch-counter door. Working in groups of two, one boy and one girl. They don't want to miss the water ride.

Jonathan peels off his Band-Aid to check for blood. When his Band-Aid won't stick again to his cheek, I help him apply a new one. When I take off the backing with my thumbnail, Jonathan tilts his cheek toward me, closes his eyes. I smooth the Band-Aid over his cheek, careful to avoid his little see-through sideburns. While I'm aiding him, memories of the girls' kicks settle over me like a cloud. Even though Jonathan's fine, I think crazy things. I should ask the principal to transfer Jonathan into my class. I should ask him to transfer everyone else out. I shouldn't think so much.

"Are you okay?" he asks. I can't answer him, not truthfully. Those are the rules.

"Will you sit beside me on the water ride?" he asks.

"We'll see." There's a reason for it. Every teacher knows. Next fall, when he comes back to school, he'll be an eighth grader. Eighth graders take classes on the third floor. On their way to recess, they sprint down the stairs. They run to the playground. They never stop at the second floor, where Cecilia and Mrs. Sampson and I teach.

I jostle a bunch of girls on purpose as I walk across the room toward the teachers. Tony is telling Mrs. Sampson and Cecilia that the last ride, the water ride, is noncontact. He's speaking very softly, making small, smooth gestures with his hands. Finally they give in.

As soon as we're done, the girls swarm Cecilia. They're tugging

at her sweater, yelling questions. For the thousandth time I think terrible thoughts. That I should break up with her. If she doesn't answer me now, I'll do it, I think. I tap her shoulder.

"Yes," she says.

"Hold my hand," I say. "Right now."

"I'm not going to talk about this." She turns back to the girls.

I squat down, staring at the gold anklet I gave her. Under the anklet, I can see a faint tan line. Or maybe I'm imagining it. I think about unfastening the anklet, proving something to her. I don't. She's kicking her foot back, trying to push me away. Her heel brushes against my wrist. Already I forgive her.

The Freedom Tunnel boats are really just inflatable orange rafts, two-seaters. Tony gives a safety speech, tells us that he and Mrs. Sampson are going to take names of all the people who deliberately splash. "Remember the words," he says. "The words are important." Mrs. Sampson keeps her hands in her pockets, lets the whistle hang loose. We all put on life jackets.

Jonathan and I float past plaster walls, under a low-arched roof. The water drifts slowly under our feet. As we round the second bend, we see the mannequins. Malcolm X. Martin Luther King. A. Philip Randolph. Not a one of them Freedom Riders. The mannequin faces are not so good—Malcolm X's chin is as long as a giraffe's, King's mouth as wide as a sail. But the bodies aren't bad. They stand behind lecterns. They're speaking.

I don't pay attention to the words until Jonathan starts laughing. Martin Luther King is telling us that he didn't land on Plymouth Rock. Plymouth Rock landed on him. Malcolm X has a dream. Frederick Douglass plans a march on Washington. A. Philip Randolph was born a slave in Maryland. They're all jumbled up.

"This is so much greater than what I said about the Ohio River," Jonathan says.

"Nobody gives Malcolm X's speech like Martin Luther King," I say.

"It's like for the first time ever you can actually hear the speech." Which is true. I touch his shoulder, to compliment him, but just for a moment.

The last station is terrifying. A black boy stands on a wooden stool. Behind him, a noose dangles from the branch of an oak tree. High in the tree limbs a large black woman, who I suppose is meant to be Ida B. Wells, holds a knife. There are no white people around. No sign of why the boy's on the stool. What's worse is the way they move. The boy constantly rocks forward and backward. Ida B. Wells inevitably extends the knife toward the rope. Nothing ever falls; nothing is ever cut.

The only sound is an incomprehensibly low grumble. Something mechanical, something breaking.

"Who's talking?" Jonathan says.

"I don't know," I say. "It's like it's coming from underwater."

"Cool. The whole place is talking to us. What's it saying?" I have no idea.

In front of the lynching, there's a pool of stagnant water, coffined by the stream's sharp bend. A white napkin floats lifelessly in the middle. Around the final turn, I see the row of unused rafts. The stack of red life vests on the dock.

"Let's find out," I say. I shove off the plaster wall and send us spinning toward the stagnant pool. The statue's there above us. We're close enough to hear the crank turning as the noose lowers, the knife drops. The voice comes from underneath. Three words I can't quite separate from the water's steady hum.

I place my hand on Jonathan's head. We don't say anything. The next boat goes by. The girls on board are taking notes on little reporter's pads. Then Mrs. Sampson goes by. Then some more boats. People are looking at us. I don't care. Tony, as he passes, touches his ear. I close my eyes.

Behind me, I hear Cecilia's voice. She's talking about her cousins, whom I've never met. "They'll always be my babies," she says. Her voice. The school's second-floor water fountain is next to her classroom. I stand there a long time, when I can, letting the water waste down the drain. Usually I can't make out her words through the wooden door, just the gruff and call of her voice. History always softens me. Even bad history.

"Mr. Breckston," she says. "Do you need some help?"

"Aren't you going to answer her?" Jonathan asks. I shake my head.

Cecilia calls me again, even by my first name, but I don't turn around. Not because I have a grudge, but because I'm doing something else. The noise rumbles up again. I don't have time for her, this minute.

"I got the first word," Jonathan says. "Cool."

"It's cool?"

"No, it's you."

"Me?"

"*You*, that's the word."

It rumbles again, and this time, knowing what's coming first, I bear down on the next two words. And it's clear as fucking day. It's making fun of us.

"Holy shit," Jonathan says. He play-slaps his face. "I mean holy shoot."

"Did it just say, 'You fucking idiot'?"

Jonathan slaps the side of the boat, and that little movement sets us rocking, carries us out into the current, around the bend. As we pass the corner, the knife comes down, the boy rocks forward, the insult rises up to us from the belly of the place.

"You fucking idiot."

"That's awesome," Jonathan says. "That's the first thing I've learned from a field trip all year." I could kiss him. Of course, I can't kiss him. At the dock, Cecilia is standing by the life vests, watching me. I look away.

Before he reaches down for Jonathan, Tony whispers something to me, something I can't make out.

"What's that?" I say. When he whispers again, I still can't hear the words, just the familiar tenor of his voice. Then, catching that, I don't need to hear anything else. Jonathan is laughing, and Tony is laughing, and then I am laughing, too. I can feel everyone's eyes on me—Mrs. Sampson's and Cecilia's and the kids'—but I don't care, not anymore.

Ain't I a King, Too?

UNTIL THE DAY OF SEPTEMBER 11, 1935, I had no cause to believe I resembled anyone on this God's earth other than myself and maybe the baseball player Babe Ruth, who had just retired from the Boston Braves. I thought I had a little bit of the Babe's spirit in me, not the talent or the fame or the fortune, of course, but at least I liked a good time, a good meal (or two), and a good-looking girl. Up to that time, I had read Senator Huey Long's name in newspaper columns, and sat with my wife and infant boy around the radio to listen to Long's addresses in 1934, when the world seemed like it was ready to shake us all off her back, she was so unkind. But I had no cause to know what the senator looked like, not until I happened to be in Long's own Louisiana, under the most unhappy of circumstances, in my father's Chevrolet, the day after Long's death by assassination.

Exactly how I ended up on the road that day is still unclear to me. The sixteen years since the Great War, I had spent in my home of Elizabethtown, Kentucky, and in due course in my thirties I had married and fathered a boy. But in that summer I got myself into arguments with my wife over money, and this led me to arguments with my father over the share I received from our family monuments business, where I did most of the work and he took most of the profits. Somehow in those arguments my wife gave up on me and put me out. After that I was no good to anybody, no good around the office, no good the times I went to see my little boy. Finally, my father, who had served two terms in the state senate, called a congressman and that congressman got me a job as an aide in the National Youth Administration office in Austin, Texas, where I was supposed to serve under a program director who became Lyndon Johnson. My father gave me the keys to his old Chevrolet and eighty-seven dollars in cash to advance me toward my new life.

It was hard, but I did not see any reason why I should visit my wife and my boy before I left. I already knew what my wife thought about me. My son, he wouldn't remember it anyway.

It was a long way to Texas by turnpike, and longer still because my father's Chevrolet gave out oil. I was in no mood for talking during the drive, and I did my business at each filling station without a nod to my fellow man. I must have passed half the world in those two days down to Louisiana, thousands of men out on the road, hats rimmed with sweat, men dropping suitcases behind them to lose the weight, men walking alone along the desiccated fields.

It was in Louisiana, a few miles north of Shreveport, where I finally gave in and spoke to someone. I had stopped again for oil,

and was finally cussing my father for his ratty car, and for his ratty life. I had half a mind to turn back north two days, and sleep on the side of the road with the windows cracked, and drive up to his office a new man and get to work on convincing him for more money and on convincing my wife to take me back. Instead of turning around and facing my father, though, I got talking with a man named Emil at the Standard Oil of Louisiana filling station. Emil gave out a whistle when he saw me, and soon enough there were two boys coming from behind the station, with their beaten wrenches, their grease-dark rags. It was evening. I hadn't slept in two full days. I was afraid they were coming to rob me. Instead Emil ran his finger over my cheek, like I was a woman. I was too tired to say anything.

"Boy, I thought you was supposed to be dead by now," Emil said. Then he turned to the two boys behind him. "Get me that poster."

One of the men behind him came back with a "Huey Long for U.S. Senate" poster. I'd like to think I was a little better looking than the man pictured there, but I can't deny there was some resemblance.

Emil held the poster's edge against my cheek. "Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce the Honorable Huey Pierce Long Jr. of the great state of Louisiana," he said. "Say something."

I didn't have anything to say.

They were tall and short, the two boys behind him. The tall one said, "Goddamn. I'll be a night train son of a bitch."

"I've been to see Huey," the short one said. "Huey's got an imperial look to him. Looks like an emperor."

"Lift your head up, boss," Emil said. Before I could, he had his hand under my chin, tilting my nose to the sky.

"That look like an emperor to you?" Emil said.

"Emperor of the rednecks," the short one said.

"Exactly. Now get on out of here." All my reactions were a few steps behind the world around me. When I finally got to saying, "I wouldn't touch me that way," Emil had already had hold of me for several seconds.

"Whatever you say, boss," Emil said. He took his hand from under my chin and wiped his fingers on his pants leg.

"You don't believe the radio anymore?" the short boy said. "Radio said he's dead."

"Get out," Emil said. The two walked away, the little one still talking, the big one not paying any attention. Emil sat down in the passenger seat of my car.

"Where you going?" he said.

"Austin."

"Not tonight, you're not," he said. "It's late for you to be driving this night. You ain't getting south anyway, not in no hurry. They got the roads filled up heading south, and all of them going to the funeral. Besides, I got a girl at home to show you to. She won't mind if I bring over Huey P. Long. She might just like that."

I started my car and sat there in the shadow of his filling station, in front of a thousand acres of dry fields and wilting corn, divided in two by this one asphalt road.

"Is it for sure he's dead?" I said. "Senator Long?"

"For sure he's in the casket," he said. "They're fixing to put him to rest tomorrow. I tell you who I feel for. Not those politicians. That Russell."

"I don't even know who that is," I said.

"His son."

All the time in the car, I was driven forward, and now for no

good reason I wanted to stop. I got out from my car, while it was still running, and walked around back to the sweat of the exhaust, and sat myself down in the gravel. I felt every point of every stone in my behind. I saw the sky above me, getting farther away every second deeper into darkness. I heard a car rushing past me on the turnpike, and felt the sting of the dust it raised in my eye.

In one reverse gulp, I vomited right into my lap. It was pure bile, black, smelled sour as flesh. I hadn't eaten in two days. Then I lay down in the gravel and closed my eyes and felt the weight and heat of my innards on my thighs, and smelled my exhaust's grainy smoke, and broke into a baby's sweat that started on my forehead and made me shiver all over. When I stopped shivering, I was ready to sleep, no matter where I was.

I heard Emil's shoes on the gravel.

"Shit," he said. "It was reversed, Huey wouldn't shed no more tears for you, I tell you that. He wasn't nobody's friend but his own." Then he bent to me. "If I ain't a fool," he said. I felt his breath over me and his hand cold on my forehead, and for a second I froze, and then I shook him off and steadied myself to my feet.

"I got it," I said as I stood.

"Just take a left up beyond the church," he said.

"I don't know," I said.

"Suit yourself," he said.

I had nothing else to do.

Not many people remember those days anymore. They do not even remember Long, who was both a senator and a governor, and who looked for one short while like he might knock Roosevelt out of the presidency, and turn this country over as it had never been turned over before, and take the money from the rich and give it to the

poor so he could make Every Man a King, which was his slogan. He used to have Share Our Wealth Clubs all over this country to support him. Now there aren't any.

It seems impossible to me that I didn't know back then that everything taking place around me, or almost all of it, would be forgotten. I could not imagine that men like Long and FDR and even Babe Ruth would fade with their memories and be replaced by men like Lyndon Johnson, who are now fading and being replaced themselves. I should have known this fact. I wasn't a child in 1935. I was as old as the century. I had made a son. I had lost a marriage. I should have known.

But I didn't.

The house Emil took me to was one room, wood-built, plank board, in an elbow of a little stream where the water bent east for a stretch of a hundred yards and then doubled back, as if the stream had swallowed something it was waiting to digest. On all sides the house was surrounded by a four-foot porch that was reaching at its edges to the sky as the weight of the house settled to the ground. It looked like the house had once been big as all its wood, and had now shrunk inward with age, and left its old dimensions as a moat against the world. There was a single window facing front, which had no glass, but only open wooden shutters. Through the shutters, I saw white hair. But we didn't go inside. We sat ourselves in my father's car and looked over a garden to our right and the browning fields across the stream. Far away in the fields there was a single tree growing, and under that tree a boy was digging a ditch.

"My name is Emil," Emil said. "But they know me inside as Bob." I didn't believe a word of it. "You want to call me Emil, that's

alright. A man misses his own name. But don't you do it in front of them. You do, I'll have to put you out. Got me?"

"I don't even know why I'm here," I said.

Inside, a white-haired man in the corner fanned himself with a Shreveport newspaper that had a picture of me on it. Me in a fancy suit alright and a little heavier than I'd like to get. Over the picture was the headline LONG DEAD. When Emil opened the door, the old man turned to us, with eyes as empty and still as peeled green grapes.

"I brought you somebody special tonight," Emil said. "Pop-pop, I brought you Governor Long, himself."

"Best throw that governor in the river," the old man said. "He's sure got a stink to him. You so busy dying you ain't got time to bathe, Governor?"

It was so quiet I finally understood he was talking to me.

"That's no river," I said. "That's a stream."

"Don't sound like the governor," he said. "I always pictured you'd be a better-spoken man."

"Need a crowd, I guess," I said. Then he laughed and took up a ball of white cotton yarn from the floor and wrapped it tight ten times around his four left-hand fingers and rubbed his right hand over the yarn and smiled a smile that only a blind man could own, a smile any sighted person would give up the second he realized that other people could see it.

Emil grabbed me a set of overalls from a stack in the corner, and we went outside. In the garden, there was a young woman, maybe nineteen, maybe twenty, young and tan and too skinny for any grown man. She had a little spade in her hand when we came up on her, and she was working some dirt along the potato plants.

When he started on talking to her, I could see the virtue of two names. It was as Bob that he quietly said, "Irene? You recognize this fellow right here?"

She dug into the ground again and reached down and felt at the potato we couldn't see, and, deciding against it, spaded the dirt back into place.

"What you want?" she said.

"Figured maybe you was getting bored of me and your father talking," he said. "Brought you someone home to entertain you. Didn't want you to think I meant to keep you bored all the time."

"It's going to be one more mouth to feed tomorrow." She said it simple as fact.

"What's tomorrow?" I said.

"What's tomorrow?" He slapped me with the seat of his own overalls. "You ain't half as smart as what they say. Tomorrow's your funeral. You're lying in state."

For a second, under Irene's eyes, I was awake again, awake just enough to want her. She let her spade fall to the dirt.

"It's true," she said. "You do favor him."

After we ate, Irene carried our dishes out to the stream, and Emil followed her. She wouldn't let him carry the dishes or the soap either one, just drag behind her, like he was her son and not some man almost twice her age. I asked the old man if he wanted me to read the newspaper aloud.

"It's true that what you smell is stronger," he said, instead of answering. "I know. I can remember when I still had the use of my eyes. I can smell a flavor coming off a man. It rises from his middle, thin as a girl's hair ribbon. That man wants my daughter."

As he said it, he took his fingers to his eyes and held them open so I could see all the death there, every vein that burst the surface of his eyes, every shade of not-white in the world as they dried and decayed. "I can tell it," he said. "He wants her."

"Seems like a one-way love to me," I said.

"Shut up," he said. His hands were off his eyes, on the armrests of his chair, like he was going to spring for me, and then the memory all returned, who he was, what he could not do, and he sank back.

"Was that your car I heard outside?" he said.

"It was."

"You going to drive us tomorrow, aren't you? You know that's why Bob wants you here. Otherwise we'd be driving with them Eastlands down the road. He doesn't want any of them near my Irene." Outside we heard a splash from the stream.

"You want to know what I smell on you?" he said.

"Throw up," I said.

"Not anymore." He opened his mouth to say something extra.

"I don't want to hear it," I said.

"Exactly," he said. "That's what I smelled. You don't want to know. Not a thing. Sit up."

I knelt for him, like I knew I would have to. He poked his fingers through my hair, down my temple, across my cheek to my lips. I'd been through all this before, with a great-uncle in Sonora. It didn't bother me, not until his fingers stopped over my eyes, one finger ball-center over each pupil. I got to wondering how it was he'd lost his own. It made me nervous.

"Can't even sit still," he said. It made him laugh. "They always said that about you, didn't they? Couldn't sit still even after he was dead."

I sat quick to the floor and let his hand float empty above me, feeling for nothing.

About then, Irene and Emil came back from outside.

"You ain't letting him finger you, are you, Governor?" Emil said.

"No I ain't."

I looked to the old man to see if he was going to call me out somehow, but instead he said, "Huey Long, how about you get me a drink of water? I never been served water by no governor before. Ain't I a king, too?"

"What's a king, anyway?" I said. "I don't even know."

"I'll get you one," Emil said.

"You will not either," Irene said. "You let him drink any more, he's going to need us up to get him outside in the middle of the night."

"King wants some water he gets it, don't he, Huey?" the old man said. "Even if it means some people sleep lightly. Ain't that right?"

"This isn't even my argument," I said. Emil went outside and came back with a glass of dirty stream water. It was pitiful to see how he ran.

"As fine a glass of water as I ever drank," the old man said.

"Did you like it?" Emil said.

In the corners of the room, Irene was laying out quilts and pillows for bed.

Nighttime there was not normal. They slept each of them in one corner of the room, the old man over by his chair, his daughter Irene on the corner closest to the stream, Emil catty-corner across

from her. Me, I completed the square on a quilt behind the supper table, diagonal from the old man.

After Emil put out the last of the candles, Irene left the house. A few minutes later, she came back with a dog I had not seen before. It was a small terrier, white and brown spotted, and dying. It dripped water to the floor. Irene, a step behind him, carried a white towel and reached it down to dry him, and the dog in a final burst of energy slipped through the towel and slowed immediately. She reached down again and the dog gave another final burst, and I realized she had dumped the dog in the stream before bringing him inside.

"He's clean," she said.

That dog was too old to live. In the moonlight I saw its inside dick grow from its belly and watched it piss a mist on the floor. A few seconds later, its red dick rose out again and this time misted blood. It went on all night, pissing and crying. The smell, I can't even describe it, how it feels to spend a night in a one-window room where you hope what you smell is piss, and fear what you smell is blood. You stop smelling anything. You feel the odor clotting to the insides of your lungs, creeping into your bloodstream, rotting you from within.

The dog lay its back legs to its towel and dragged itself by its front paws across the room toward the old man. It took the dog about five minutes to find its way past the chair to the old man. When the dog reached him, the old man said, "Just die. Hear me? Just die yourself. Right now. I'll even bring the shovel."

From his corner, Emil tried to call for the dog, to impress Irene, I suppose.

"Just shut up and let him be," Irene said, and that quieted Emil,

for a while. So we sat there and tried to sleep in the smell and the sound of the dog's unending piss and the old man's mumbled sleep moan.

Sometime in the night I came awake to the memory of the sound of a board whining under weight, but no one in the house looked to be moving. The moon was gone, and the room was dark. Through the one window I saw only the faint sky and the far stars. I did not hear the dog. I also did not hear the old man for long seconds, even for a half minute, not a breath. Then breath came to him loud and long. A few normal breaths after that, and then back to the wait. I counted time, one Mississippi, two Mississippi, up to seventeen seconds, and then the relief of the old man's breath. It was like he was practicing dying, working his way up to it, right there in front of us.

I heard again the give of the floorboard and this time could not see but felt Emil roll from his quilt mattress (it was too hot for any of us to use sheets) and start to crawl across the piss-stink floor to Irene. Emil's want was something like what the old man said. It was a flavor, a smell under all the rest. When Emil was halfway across the floor, I heard the old man fall into a normal breath. The old man's hand worked along the base of his chair. The next sound was the newspaper crumpling. The newspaper swatted the floor. The dog jumped. We heard the fresh squirt of fluid. Poor Emil crawled back to his own corner.

Nobody was asleep after that. I didn't have anything of my own to say to them. I repeated something I'd heard the year before on one of Long's radio addresses.

"Eighty to eighty-five to ninety percent of the wealth of this country is in the hands of the richest one percent of the popula-

tion," I said. "Give me the chance to dry the eyes of those who still weep here."

"Shut up," Irene said. After that, I slept.

It wasn't an unearned sleep and it must have been for that reason I woke up so early, while Emil slept stupidly in his corner, dead again to the world in his infant's feet-tucked ball. The old man lay flat on his back in his corner, eyes open and empty. I saw the day outside through the shutters. The morning sun was full and flowering in the sky, the earth's dust raised by the wind in the distance. All night I had slept and felt nothing, not even a dream's beginning, and now in the morning I woke and knew as I saw these men asleep on their floor that the whole God's world was nothing more than a bait-and-switch game where you got suckered in by pretty things like women and you got taken for everything you had. When the world sucked you dry to the bone, she got shed of you and tossed you aside to rot on your own. It was the same for me as it was for those men on the floor, except I still had my father's note in his car, the name and address of Lyndon Johnson on a scrap of paper.

Outside, on the banks of the stream, I saw Irene kneel into the dirt and cup some water in her hands and rub the water over her arms before cupping some more and rubbing it over her cheeks. Her skin shined dark in the light. While I watched her, she stepped deep down into the stream, until the stream took her knees, until the stream soaked up her skirt, until the stream owned her blouse, until she was neck deep in the water. I saw only the back of her head floating unattached, unowned above the brown spread. Just as slowly, then, she turned to face me. For a moment she stared directly at me and yet made no sign she saw me. The thought that I wanted her came to me from someplace far distant, as if the thought

had nothing whatever to do with what I felt, but only reflected what I should feel. I walked down to the stream and stepped from the dry mud bank into the water beside her. The bottom filled the spaces between my toes. I was wearing only my undershorts.

"I don't know why you don't just go," she said. "Anybody knows you ain't going to stay. Why you want trouble?"

"I don't want trouble," I said. "I might stay my whole life." I touched her hand in the water. Before I knew it, she gripped my head in both hands and shoved me under the water. I probably could have forced my way up, but I stayed down and opened my eyes and saw that from the inside, the water was still brown. When she let me up, I slid my front lick of hair from my face.

"I don't know what he wants from you," she said. In her awkward, high-knee walk, she stepped from the stream until the water reached only her boy's breasts, only her waist, only her knees. Then she stood soaking on the bank in front of me. She held her arms out from her side to let the water drip free.

"He's watching inside," she said. "I guess you will, too."

She took a folded white dress from the ground in front of her and snapped it. It waved between us a moment and then she replaced it to the ground as gently as it came. Her fingertips undid her blouse buttons slowly. I watched the wet blouse fall under her brown nipple, watched her hands as they kept unbuttoning.

"I'm going inside," I said.

"That doesn't make you a saint," she said.

In the house, Emil stepped from the window. The old man tore chunks from a loaf of bread they passed back and forth. Beside them, the dog slept. It was terrible to walk inside and smell that smell again.

"Don't get to be governor by sleeping in, I guess," Emil said. He

took the loaf from the old man and tore a chunk. I could tell he was already tired of me.

"You got any room in that there limousine for a dog?" the old man said. They both laughed.

"I don't even got room for you, maybe," I said.

"Can't even take a joke, can he?" Emil said. For a minute or two I was hot to leave them all behind, but when the daughter came back inside I got thinking again.

The whole drive down to Baton Rouge, I sat up front with Irene and the dog. In the back the old man and Emil talked on and on about the chance of rain and the succession of power in the state. Every once in a while, they yelled up to me, to make fun of me, "What you think, Huey? Is it O. K. Allen or your baby brother what's going to run the show?"

The dog sat easily on Irene's lap and gave its face to the open window, not even acknowledging the piss and blood it left for the towel underneath him. Irene stared straight ahead into the worlds of heat and the bodies of dust and the slowing lines of cars. Still she was a woman, and wore that white dress. I wanted her eyes on mine.

"Poor thing," I said to her.

"It doesn't bother him any." She hadn't touched the dog the whole trip, but then, just to show me, she petted its ears. The dog whined to the feel of her hand.

Miles from the new capitol, one of Huey's patrolmen stopped our line of cars and told us all to turn around and leave our cars in the middle of the turnpike, facing north.

"There aren't places in all of Baton Rouge for you people,"

he said. "You going to walk in, pay your respects, walk out, got me?"

I didn't like it. What if I wanted to leave early? What if I wanted to change direction?

"You go back where you came from," the patrolman said.

It seemed wrong to me, but he was the one with the gun, so we did what he said, and parked in the road, facing north. Through the window, I saw my father's note hanging from the ashtray. I leaned inside and took the paper in my hands. It felt like I was holding my whole future. I tore it in two and left it on the seat.

In the middle of the flood of men and women and children carrying their bag lunches to see the governor one last time, Emil nudged me away from the old man and Irene.

"Thanks a lot," he said. "Just when a fellow thinks somebody's on his side, then you two go jabbering up in the front seat like I ain't been sitting and waiting, and waiting and sitting all these months. You don't think she likes you, do you? You're just the new speck of shit on the sidewalk."

Before I could say anything, Irene found us and held her father's hand to me. What could I do? I took it. Then she and Emil and the dog walked off into the crowd, not touching, not talking, together.

Up in the capitol square, there were people sleeping on quilts under trees, and a Negro baby screaming in its mother's arms, and an old man in a green hat carving his knife blade into the stairwell, and a young girl in a white Easter dress drawing pictures of everyone. A hundred thousand people, the next-day papers said. There were guards everywhere in tan uniforms carrying loaded rifles against the chance that the violence that killed Long on the capitol steps might show itself again. Some of the troopers were running wire for the loudspeakers that would broadcast

the funeral to all these people. The old man and I joined the line, half a mile long, of mourners who waited to see the governor's body.

There were women in the line ahead of us, women in old-style bonnets, women holding babies, women speaking what sounded like French. Not everyone as sad as they should be. Lots of people were drunk already and looking to get drunker. The old man and I kept ourselves to ourselves.

"It's a terrible day," I said to the old man.

"She's not even my daughter," the old man said.

"That's not even my business."

"She's my brother's. I raised her since she was four. Five, six years now, I can't even touch her face. She won't let me."

"You got much memory what the women looked like when you could see?"

He was back to his blind man's grin, the same one I'd seen him use on the yarn the night before.

"Picture me one of the women you remember. She ain't big"—I stopped here in my lie, and should have stopped altogether—"but she ain't small neither. Maybe you remember one of those women, how they wash their face at night. And their face is so right, that they put the water to both cheeks and it runs even to the tip of their chin and falls off their chin from both sides to the floor in a single drop, and the rest of the water is drying on the skin of their cheeks. That's what your daughter looks like."

"It ain't right, that Bob fellow sleeping in my own house, and chasing my own daughter, right under my eyes."

"He's chasing her, that's for sure."

"She tells me every morning she's going to put him out, but she doesn't do it."

We filed along with everybody else until we reached the casket.

There were armed soldiers everywhere. Six in a row behind the casket. Six in a row behind us. A man in a black suit stood between us and the row of soldiers behind. He held a Bible in his hand, and he used it to guide people. When you reached the casket, you felt the book slide against your back thigh and press you forward until you were past. Then he took the Bible from your leg and moved on to the next person. So all we had was a minute.

Long did not look like he did in the newspapers, not anymore. Of course he was paler and smelled medicine-sick and weighed less than what he had. But more than that, there wasn't any grin left to him, not even a snarl. Somehow, in his death, the muscles in his throat looked like they had tensed up and drawn the skin tight over his lower jaw. It made him look like a boy. It made him look ashamed.

The old man kept squeezing my hand. I knew what he wanted. So I asked one of the soldiers, "He can't see. Can he touch him?"

"You blind?" the soldier said.

"I ain't deaf," the old man said.

"You don't want to touch him anyway," the soldier said. "He's dead."

It would have been right if there had been a buzzard circling overhead. Of course, they wouldn't have allowed that. One of them soldiers would have raised his rifle, shot it down. But Huey was just a piece of meat then, getting old on the slab. Whatever was in him before was gone. Everything about the day seemed like a waste of time.

"It doesn't matter what you want," the old man said. "When your time's called, you're finished."

"I suppose," I said.

The nothing I felt made me mad. I could have been another day

closer to Austin and my new life and I had given that day away for nothing, like I had given away so many of my days. It was a feeling that grew in me, and turned me sour for the rest of the afternoon, and maybe explains some of what happened later. Beside me, the old man sniffed. Then I felt the Bible on my thigh. When it pressed me hard, I did what I was supposed to do and walked away from the casket.

After we were free of the line and wandering aimless in the plaza and waiting for the Reverend Gerald L. K. Smith to start on his sermon, the old man said to me, "It ain't right, my daughter and that man. I know it."

"What can I do?" I said. A few steps later I took the keys to my father's Chevrolet and slid them in the old man's left pocket. "You got your ticket home, boss. You want to give anybody else a ride, that's up to you."

"Now we're talking," he said.

"Irene won't like it."

"I don't even care."

It was in my mind to speak to Long's son Russell, who later became a U.S. senator on his own account, but then was just a sixteen-year-old boy. I wasn't sure what I wanted to tell him, but I thought I would know once I saw him. I did not know what Russell looked like, though, and with all the boys around I could not hope to find him, so the old man and I sat ourselves down and waited for the speaking.

A few days later, I read in the Baton Rouge paper where people thought Gerald L. K. Smith gave a hell of a speech. He told us that as long as there is suffering on this globe, people will remember

Huey P. Long Jr. I remember Smith's screaming, but the message passed over me at the time. Not a whit of it sunk in, or took, or caused anything new to grow inside me.

The four of us and the dog sat on the plaza and watched Smith talk. Then the soldiers fired into the air and the flag came down in front of us. Long's brothers, whom he hated, helped carry the casket to some place where no one would ever see it again. After the brothers and the body were gone, I asked Emil, "You get a look at that body?"

"It's alive as you are," he said. "This ain't nothing but a joke." He winked at me.

Then Irene lifted the dog from her lap. It pissed its mist of urine and blood on the sidewalk. We passed people by the thousands who were done mourning and ready to celebrate, and thousands more who would never be done mourning. At the edge of the plaza, the old man squeezed my hand tight.

"You sure you got your keys?" he said.

"He's got his keys," Emil said. "What you think he is, stupid?"

"Take them out for him," Irene said to me. "He just wants to be sure."

So I did the whole act. I turned my pockets. I scratched my head. I let them all pat me down. The old man was good. He kept screaming and cussing at me, like he was furious. Emil kept saying, "Calm down, Pop-pop."

"Shut up," Irene said. "You're all so stupid. Everything is so stupid." We decided Emil and I would look for the keys. She and the old man and the dog started their walk down the streets, past the miles of parked cars to my father's car, where they would wait for me, if I wanted to sneak out to them and leave Emil behind.

"Which side you want to take?" Emil asked me.

"That ain't a good start, you let her talk to you that way, bossing you," I said. "Why you want her so bad?"

"You don't even know," he said.

I had a lot of thoughts that next hour into dark, while I watched Emil walk like a dummy from family to family and ask if they had seen my keys, and turn away and walk to the next one. I thought about Austin and the chance I might become a new man there, one famous and fortunate. Much later, when I saw Lyndon Johnson's name in the newspapers and I remembered it from my father's note, I let those thoughts back in. But it was a ridiculous way of thinking.

Below me, Emil wouldn't stop. He was no quitter. He reached one woman on her blankets and he squatted to talk to her. As soon as she shook her head no, he was up walking to the next person, and ready to squat again. I was sure I did not want him to catch me. I did not want to be back in the car with them, and with that note. I wanted far away from the capitol, too. Everything around me was moving, even the people who weren't moving. The old man and Irene were walking to my father's car. My father and my wife were doing something back in Elizabethtown, though I could not see them. Even my son. In the center of it, I was still as the earth's axis. But soon as I had those thoughts, I knew I would not be still for long. It was hard to get moving, though. So I hid behind a column at the south end of the capitol. When Emil got near enough to make me nervous he might find me, I walked down the steps and headed south, away into a new crowd of people who were all going someplace else.

Domestic Architecture

THEY HAD COME A LONG WAY—from a place called Lebanon, Tennessee—and they moved as far back as they could, into a small white house on the lap of the mountain, at the end of a gravel road. It was a part of Hawaii that was not really like Hawaii at all. When it rained—which was every afternoon—little cuts of water carved the side of the mountain, running to a cold reservoir and from there into the two green water tanks. Other than the county men who inspected those tanks every Monday, the only people the family ever saw were the paniolos on their quarter horses. The cowboys lifted their hats hello, then turned back into the hau bush.

The northeast trades blew all the way from Oregon in the summertime, howling across the Pacific. When the gusts battered the mountainside behind the house, they gave up their haul of rain-

water, and shuffled off to the coasts. His father called it their own private concert, the Kauai symphony. His mother claimed she couldn't hear it at all. Eugene thought it was a message coming to them from home, a language he could no longer understand.

When the locals bothered to talk to the crazy haole family, they all said the same thing: "Is a good house, yeah? Been through Dot, and Iwa, both. The new houses they went flying like they had wings during the hurricane. But the man who built this one, he built 'em strong, with love. So don't tear 'em down, alright?"

"All we're doing is building a bathroom, right, Champ?" the father said. But Eugene bit into his lip, instead of answering. That much, he held for himself, his consent, even if he could not claim anything else.

Back when they lived in Lebanon, Tennessee, Eugene walked down to the Stop N Go after school. He drank Dr Pepper from the fountain, rolled nickels for the girl who worked the counter, studied the football magazines. Tried not to look out at the gas pumps, where his father parked his Skylark most afternoons. If Eugene glanced that way, his father would wave. His father had a new woman, a new life in Nashville, and Eugene wished his father would just leave him and his mother alone. At four-fifteen, his father drove away, and by four-twenty his mother was there to take him home. Sometimes his father would circle back at four-thirty and ask about the magazines Eugene had been reading. At least that was what the counter girl told him.

One day, his father waited in the lot for Eugene's mother.

"I'm not very proud of myself," he said.

"I don't want to be standing here again in six months," his mother said. "I don't want to be living in reruns."

"Then let's get the fuck out of here," his father said. "You deserve better than Lebanon, Tennessee. The Champ deserves better."

"It's not the Lebanon, Tennessee, part I'm worried about," his mother said. But she went anyway. Before, the father called Eugene "the Champ" only some of the time. Ever since they moved to Hawaii, he didn't ever call the boy anything else.

The only bathroom in the house was attached to the master bedroom. When Eugene knocked, his parents scurried around before they called him in. They sat beside each other on top of the covers, wearing their new polyester pajamas. Behind them, bundled on the floor, were the T-shirts and swim trunks they'd worn that day. They were just pretending to be ready for bed, just pretending to have their shit together.

"Where you two going?" Eugene said.

"People change their clothes, Eugene," his mother said. "There's nothing unusual about that." While his father was off in Nashville with his girlfriend, his mother called the man every kind of crazy. But now she had to defend him.

"What's unusual is the Champ having to knock on the door to use the bathroom," his father said. "We've got to build him his own shitter."

"It's just a knock on the door," his mother said. "It's no big deal."

"It's a big deal to the Champ," his father said.

They looked at him like they expected him to say something.

A long time ago, before Pearl Harbor and before Hurricane Dot, a leper, a haole man from Honolulu, built the house for his wife and two little girls. In the backyard, he cleared a small garden and put

up a thatched-roof picnic table. When he was finished, he hiked up the side of the mountain, far enough to protect them from his demons and his diseases. And he raised himself a tin-roof shack with a lantern and a bench out front, where he could see his wife at work in the garden in her straw hat. Even in the rain, his girls carried their food out to the thatched-roof picnic table and ate there, where he could see them.

Eugene never slept through the night. Falling asleep was no trouble; he read stories about the University of Tennessee Vols until he could not stay awake, until his fingers loosened and let the magazine drop onto the floor. But sometime in the night, he woke up sweating and cold, his ears stinging from the noise. It was a sound he could not parse into words, like an announcement broadcast over a bad PA system. It seemed to come from above, from the corner where his ceiling met the wall, near the window that faced the dark mountain. Eugene stared at the cracking line of paint in the corner, at the gloomy shoulder of the mountain. Then he felt the little pain near the bottom of his stomach, the need to go to the bathroom.

The architect was a Portagee named Glenn Medeiros. He had a big belly that swelled over his white slacks, and he wore a blue button shirt, no tie. His face was shiny and handsome, and he winked at Eugene as they shook hands. With a practiced, athletic move, the architect slid the rubber band from a rolled-up blueprint. He rolled the plans onto the desk and weighted them down by placing at each corner a small, purplish cowrie. Their house was nothing more than flat lines on powdery paper.

"Everybody is going to hate me if I mess with that old house to build you a bathroom," the architect said. "They think it's a curse

if you work on that house. There's a story about the leper man who built it."

"The Champ loves that story," the father said.

"You call him that because he won something? Spelling, or football, or swimming?"

"It's his nickname," the mother said, "but you can call him Eugene."

"I call him the Champ because he's my Champ," his father said. "It doesn't get any simpler than that."

They were climbing the mountain, and the pasture had just turned to jungle.

"Lead on, Champ," the father said. "You're the one wanted to come up here."

Eugene squinted into the brush. He had no idea which way to go. His father pressed a thumb into the boy's back, nudging him forward, not too hard.

"Don't trap yourself in thinking, Champ. Act now, apologize later."

"I'm listening for something," Eugene said.

"A shack doesn't make no sound, Champ. Not even a leper's shack."

But Eugene waited for the wind to tell him where to go. Once he found the leper's spot, he was sure, he could understand what the wind was trying to tell him. Its words got tangled up when it fell back into the valley, into their house. But up here, the words would be clear. That was true for the leper, Eugene believed, and it would be true for him. Up here, their house would look small, a place to dream about, and to forget.

The leper's wife set a plate of food by the garden fence, and the leper did not come to get it until she was safely standing on the back steps. Once, early on, when the hurt was fresh, she ran to him. And the man fled for a week into the mountains, all the way to the Alakai Swamp. But on normal evenings, he talked to his wife from behind the fence until the sadness weighted their words. One day, when he did not come, his wife waved down a paniolo in the pasture, and the man rode to the shack and found the husband's corpse spread over the shack's floor. The paniolo, thinking quickly, set fire to the body and to the shack, so that they would do no harm. It rained, and the water brought steam from the tin roof, which turned pink but would not melt.

The voice was talking to him; it was saying something that it wanted him to hear. Eugene squinted harder, tilted his head toward the ceiling, but the sounds would not separate. Without opening his eyes, he climbed to his feet, standing on his bedcovers, and began to poke at the ceiling. The paint fluttered down to his blue blanket. The ceiling was just plywood, half-rotten and wormy. Strong enough for two hurricanes, and yet held together by nothing more than rotting wood and old nails.

He felt water splashing his finger. Rain. When he pulled his finger from the hole, he heard a different sound, higher and whiny. The voice had carried all the way from the United States, the real United States, to tell him something. But he couldn't parse the words. And then he had to go to the bathroom. He ran through his parents' bedroom without knocking. They scurried around, but he didn't even bother to look.

"Remember to knock," his mother said.

"Listen," his father said proudly. "A quarter horse couldn't piss any harder than that."

After they waded through an even deeper web of brush and overgrowth, the boy looked down the mountainside. There was a full curtain of hau bush. Through the wet green leaves, he could see little patches of the pasture and a narrow slice of his mother's garden and one small cut of black shingles. The roof of their house. Up here the wind sounded softer as it first struck the mountainside, a throaty whistle instead of the roar it dumped into the valley.

"This isn't the spot," the boy said. "From here, the leper wouldn't be able to see them. Not the way he'd want to."

"Well, I tell you what I think, Champ. I think you found it." His father scratched his face. Already, his father was sweaty and irritable.

The boy squinted up the mountain, looking for a sign. His father nudged him in the back.

"Time to get going, Champ. Before the rain catches us."

The line of the downpour moved across the mountainside, cutting forward like an army claiming its land. His father began to run, but Eugene hid under a tall hau bush. When he came down, after the sky cleared, his shoes squished and his sleeves stuck to his wrists.

The architect laid a sheet of white paper down on the blueprint, covering one wall.

"Say we tear that out. Say you want to have a big French window where you can sit on the sill and read books. You like to read, yeah?" The architect drew a few quick lines, and there was a new wall, an

extended window, a brief sketch of a boy sitting on the sill. He had athlete's fingers, the architect, quick and unself-conscious, and the boy liked to watch him draw.

"Lots of boys like lofts. You put a bed on stilts here, and you've got like a little cave up there, almost. A room down here that everybody can see and your own little place up there." The architect sketched the stilts, the bed, the new room. "It can be anything you want."

The paniolo had taken one thing from the shack before he set the fire, a notebook the leper stored in a waterproof bag. In that journal, the leper wrote every evening about the things he saw, and some of the times what he saw was his wife and his daughters at their table with their soup spoons, and some of the times he saw things that his wife could not understand. "Seven p.m.," it read. "Flashes of green light over the backyard, and the voices too loud and too unhappy among the rumble below, eating. Eating." It was a private language, his enclosed thoughts, and it made no sense to her.

A month after the leper died, the cowboy walked up the road and gave the journal to the oldest daughter, as an eighth-grade graduation present. Within a year the paniolo and the mother married, and they moved with the girls to the Big Island, to a cattle ranch where the daughters still lived, old and unmarried, according to the stories the locals told.

"You can just tear a wall down?" Eugene asked.

"Takes like an hour, once they check for wiring," the architect said.

"Could it be a window? The whole wall. I'd be almost living outside."

"Like this?" The architect drew a large sliding glass door. "It'd get pretty windy."

"I want the whole wall to be a window. I want you to make it like I'm living outside."

"He gets excited," his mother said. "He gets that from his father."

"Well, he's the Champ," his father said.

"You don't have to decide today," the architect said. The boy almost answered, and then he realized the architect wasn't speaking to him. The architect was speaking to his mother.

The noise was even louder, even more cacophonous. The sound of a dozen instruments playing in a small closet. Raindrops sliced through the hole and slapped his cheeks. The words were coming fast now, and he still could not make sense of them. Eugene carried a chair from the dining room, wedged the legs in place with blankets. Slowly, pressing his palms against the wall, he climbed up, one foot at a time. He bent his neck to keep from bumping the ceiling. The rain came steady through the hole now, slapping his fingers. It wasn't until he pressed himself all the way into the corner, until his knees braced against the wall and his fingertips clawed the plywood above him, that he could really sense the size of the world out there, the shapes moving under the darkness. Cows and wind and the running streams of water, of course, and other things, too.

The urge came from below, like always. His body betraying him, calling him back toward his parents. But Eugene didn't listen. With his thumb, he peeled off a chunk of the wall, and the rain swept

over him. His pajamas clung to his knees, from piss or rainwater, but he didn't care. He pressed his temple against the hole, and the water filled his ear, sloshing down his outer canal toward his brain. The rain cushioned him against the world, softened him until he could not hear his bladder or the wind or the sound of his father's voice or anything else that might be coming up from behind him. He leaned closer, listening for what the quiet could say.

Hope Chests

THURSDAYS, INSTEAD OF FOLLOWING Ruskin Street to the apartment he shared with his young wife, Norbert turned north on Mason, where, on the basement floor of a triple-decker, Zanny's father lived alone. Norbert walked slowly past the greengrocers and the butcher shops, trying not to think about his situation. His wife did not know that her father had followed them from Hardin County, Kentucky, to this Ohio River town. Norbert meant to tell her; he just couldn't make himself do it.

After seven weeks, the old man still hadn't furnished his apartment. On the floor there were two blankets, one blue and one white, yellowing long johns draped over the bathtub, a wire-bristle hairbrush sitting on the sink. The old man was sitting on his wooden chest, wearing his conductor's cap. He offered Norbert the wooden

chest as a seat. Like Zanny, her father seemed both rough and delicate. There was nothing vicious about him, nothing to help Norbert understand Zanny's anger. Zanny wouldn't explain it, either. When he asked her if she had been beaten, she said, "Would it make you feel better if I said yes? I can't stand him, and I don't even have a good reason. That's the kind of girl you married. Now you probably wish you didn't." Afterward she retreated to their bedroom and sewed in the dark. He stopped asking her questions. But he did not stop visiting the old man.

"Kill anybody today?" Norbert said.

"Not today, governor," the old man said. Forty years ago, Zanny's father played a minor role in the assassination of Kentucky's governor William Goebel. The old man, then a railroad conductor, helped hide the assassin on board an L&N train bound for the mountains. A few days later he saw Goebel's dead body in the coffin, and the sight sobered him. He quit the L&N, returned to Hardin County to marry Zanny's mother, and talked about the assassination constantly, with both remorse and pride. He called all his male friends "governor," which Norbert didn't know how to take.

"Norbert, a man by himself isn't any good to anyone," he said.

"And a man with a woman is even worse." They both laughed.

"You talked to her?" Zanny's father said.

"I am talking to her." A lie. He was afraid to mention the man's name to Zanny. "She just needs time. She wants the place to be hers before she lets anybody else inside."

"What about you? Aren't you allowed inside?"

"When I'm on good behavior." They laughed again.

"Tell her I'll be clean as a whistle. I can be sweet as a song. Will you tell her that? Will you?"

Norbert dragged his shoe across the stone floor. "I will," he said.

Zanny and her husband lived in a railroad apartment above an auto garage. That evening, Zanny sat on the bed, sewing her new initials into faded gray sheets, her mother's old linen. Zanny did not have the hope chest the sheets had been stored in; the hope chest had been too large to sneak out of her father's house. Norbert, sitting in his car that night, saw her run out onto the porch with her sheets in one hand, a cardboard suitcase in the other. They drove away, and then a few months later, Norbert saw her father sitting on the curb outside the city's vocational school. Zanny joked about the chest, taking on an old woman's voice, crooning, "Hope? Hope? Who has room to spare for hope?" It was taking Zanny a long time to sew her initials in the linen. AGH in white thread, rising like blisters from the gray sheets. At night, she sewed in the dark while Norbert slept, and sometimes in the morning her fingertips were swollen and red where she had pricked herself, but she did not complain. Not ever.

When Norbert came inside, she knotted the thread and tossed the sheets on the floor. She was a small woman, too small for her own skeleton; at her joints, where bones protruded, her skin was white and ashy. Not beautiful, but striking, one of the girls you could look at, as a teacher, and see the cocooned beauty waiting to flesh itself out. She often seemed amused—except when she concentrated on her sewing.

"What's so funny?" he said. He was afraid she could smell her father on him.

"I'm not laughing. I'm just happy."

"Happy people smile." He regretted saying it; his guilt made him grumpy.

"Should I write that in my notebook, Mr. Haslung?"

He sat down on the couch, held his face in his hands. Whenever she referred to their "situation," he became morose. Norbert had been her high school history teacher, though he never touched her while she was a student. She had laughed at his classroom jokes. "How many Kentuckians signed the Declaration of Independence?" he would ask, and she would answer, "Seventeen, every one of them named X." The other students didn't realize that Kentucky didn't even exist when the Declaration was signed. After the school year she teasingly asked him to take her to Jefferson Davis's boyhood home in western Kentucky, and he agreed. They visited Ashland and Lincoln's birthplace and Shakertown before they kissed. She brought up marriage; he warned her that he was divorced, that they would have to leave town if they married. That was fine with her.

He had been happy on their drive up to Hastings, Ohio, but now he was sensitive about being her teacher. Sometimes he asked her if she had married him because she was afraid of him. "Of you?" she said. "Maybe I'd be afraid of your ex-wife." But he was tentative with her, touching her too softly, sulking when she mentioned their past.

"Come here," she said. She lay back on the bed. Her brown hair piled around her on the pillow. Beneath him, he heard car engines grumbling and the hammer of metal on metal, a busy night for their landlord in the ground-floor garages. Cars in all three ports. The noise of the torque wrenches, and the men's occasional cursing, and the sight of Zanny's brown hair on the white pillow made talking seem not only useless but something antiquarian, quaint,

soon to be forgotten with all the other relics of his past life. Marrying a younger woman meant you were literally marrying the future, someone who would outlive you.

Norbert could not disappear into the sex the way Zanny did. As her young body worked on top of him, he pictured the old man shivering under the white blanket. The thoughts delayed him until she reached her moment. Then, rolling on top of her, moving as quickly as he could, all of a sudden, before he even had time to recognize it, he was lost in the noise. As soon as he finished, he fell asleep beside her on the bed.

Norbert slept through the knock on the door, but Zanny, who napped in the afternoons, was at work again on her sheets. The letters were never straight enough; she was forever tearing the stitches and starting over. When the knocking sounded again, Zanny slipped a nightgown over her head. It might be their landlord, Christian Menz. Some days the bald-headed little German let her lie on the rolling board and stare at the undercarriage of his cars, showing her the axles, the pans, the belts, the simple connections that held the cars together and made them go.

The garage was dark, and so was the street beyond it. No sign of anyone. But here in front of her, on the landing, was the hope chest that had belonged to her mother, that had by rights belonged to her for the last twelve years. The chest itself was almost five feet long, made of finished walnut, swollen with age so that it propped slightly open. There was a busted metal clasp on its front face. The chest had been her mother's and before that her grandmother's. Each of those women filled the chest with presents during their engagements and fashioned those presents to their upcoming, con-

nubial lives, sewing initials into sheets, carving names onto brass candlesticks. The chest, which was her only connection to her dead mother, was so frequently in her thoughts that at first she did not wonder why it was on her porch. But then she heard a cough and understood.

Zanny opened the chest. Inside, she saw what she expected: her father curled into a tight little ball, his hands wrapped around his knees, his blue eyes wide open, the heels of his shoes pressed against the wooden slats. Beside him were two old blankets, a bottle of evil-smelling liquid, and his conductor's hat.

"Forget something?" he said.

"You're cluttering my porch." On her way inside, she shut the front door without throwing the bolt. Once she was in bed, she heard the door open and the scraping sound of the chest being dragged across the threshold, into her apartment. Norbert was awake.

"What's he doing here?" Norbert said.

"He's not collecting for the Salvation Army, I can say that." Norbert rolled over. She lay there alone, clenched and angry. Norbert didn't deserve that; probably her father didn't deserve the way she talked to him either. But she couldn't help it. The words came to her so fast she couldn't control them. It was the only way to shut her father up. She pressed her hand over her mouth.

The old man insisted on burying her mother in the garden. Alexandra, who was then six years old, and her married brothers stood in their Sunday suits while her father climbed inside the hole he had dug that morning. "Bring her to me," her father said, and then her brothers lowered the casket into his hands. For a few mo-

ments, he lay face down, spread-eagled on top of her casket, and then he pulled himself up, dirtying the knees of his britches. They stood there, silent, in a circle around the open hole, until the train sounded as it crossed the Bardstown Road. When the train—and the wind it carried all the way from Louisville—passed, her father shoveled dirt over the coffin.

It was just Zanny and her father. Her brothers never came to visit. Her father teased her, called her "monkeybrains," "squanto," "mouse ears." His little, harmless habits annoyed her: the long vowels he inserted in words like *conductor* and *hickory*, the story about Governor Goebel he told and retold, the way he refused to talk about her mother. "Anything I'd say wouldn't live up to her," her father would say. "I had to do wrong before I could do right. I had to kill a man dead before I could live. But your mother knew up from down. She was born with her eyes open." He would walk out past the pole beans in their garden and across the Bardstown Road to the train track, where he batted his conductor's hat against his thigh and waited for the Louisville engine.

When she was thirteen years old, an inexplicable hatred entered her. He talked about trains so much; why wouldn't he just get on board? Why couldn't he leave her alone? As the Louisville engine passed, she leapt from the porch and ran through the garden. She shoved him as hard as she could, but he didn't move. He turned, laughing, thinking she was playing, and grabbed at her ears, until she found a rock and threw it square at his jaw. When he fell, he landed in the dirt, a safe distance from the tracks. Upstairs in her bedroom she piled pillows on top of her face and tried to convince herself that she had not meant to hurt her father, that she only meant to help him on board the train. He did not punish

her. He stood in the doorway, pressing his handkerchief against his chin.

"Why won't you say anything to me?" he said. "What do you think God gave you a mouth for, if you won't ever use it?"

"Close your mouth before something flies in there," she said. He grinned; he was not so alone.

"Nice throwing arm you got there, monkeybrains."

"Strong arm, bad aim." She enjoyed her first few comments; it was true that she liked to hurt him. But then the guilt came. She could not look at him.

"Keep talking, Zanny," he said. "You'll have time for quiet when I'm gone."

"At least there's something to look forward to." Even that made him laugh. She felt like she was sinking; she hoped she would sink right into the ground, like her mother. She kept talking, hoping to shut him up.

Her husband's tenderness made her tender. At first she had just been shy; he was older, better educated, her teacher. Now that she was no longer shy, she was gentle. His feelings were so easily hurt. If he asked her for a glass of water, she sometimes couldn't help saying, "Some dog bite off your legs today, keep you from getting up yourself?" Something like that, something she said to her father seven days a week, hurt Norbert. Slowly, without looking at her, he would fill his glass of water and sit down on the sofa, staring at the textbook in his lap, chewing the underside of his lip. Zanny walked the floor, too nervous for her sewing. She wanted to pour him a thousand glasses of water. She wanted him to fight back.

In the morning, before she walked out to the kitchen, where her

father was snoring, she lay on her side, studying her husband. He was awake, too, staring at the ceiling, probably thinking about his lesson plans. He was very conscientious.

"My friends used to say you talked too much during class," she said. "Now you won't say a word."

"Zanny, I'm sorry." Norbert closed his eyes.

"Sorry for what? Sorry for this?" She kissed him.

"I'm sorry about your father."

"He isn't your fault. You're not the one who married my mother. Sleep a little more." She touched her fingers to her lips, then to his cheeks.

Her father was sitting at the kitchen table, eating cereal from a white bowl.

"I'll fix you something hot," she said. She cracked eggs into the skillet, where they sizzled. Today, she would make eggs for her husband—and her father—and tonight she would buy bacon, and after tomorrow, if things did not go well, she and her husband would borrow a car from their landlord, Christian Menz, and drive her father back to Hardin County, Kentucky. That was what she told herself.

"Eggs?" She handed one plate to her father, the other, larger one to Norbert, who was now sitting at the table in his blue bathrobe. They both began to eat. She leaned against the counter and watched them. Her husband shook salt onto his eggs and passed the shaker to her father. It gave her a little pleasure. She washed her hands in the sink.

"The way these eggs taste, I'd hate to see the chicken," her father said.

"Looked a lot like you, actually. All bluster, no brain."

"Zanny," her husband said. "He's your father."

"Well, he's not the *Mona Lisa*. That's for sure." Norbert's

fork clinked as he laid it on his plate. He was staring at her; she could tell.

She leaned into the sink, where the tap was still running, and cupped her hand and began splashing water into her mouth as fast as she could.

Zanny sat on her bed, sewing her new initials into her linen while the men jabbered in the living room. After breakfast, Norbert had carried her mother's hope chest into the bedroom and placed her sheets inside, which was a nice gesture, but only made her feel worse about snapping at him.

"Are you angry at me, Zanny?" he said. "Do you want me to throw him out?"

"Don't think I'm mad at you, Norbert. Don't ever think that."

Now he felt worse. Norbert was already nervous that Zanny would find out about the last seven weeks. He shifted his weight from his right to his left. He tapped his fingers against his thigh. In class he and Zanny had talked nonstop; she interrupted his lectures with jokes; he asked questions directly to her. They chatted in the hallway during recess. But now, without an audience, without history as a topic between them, he did not know what to say. And he was afraid of saying something hurtful. It had been twenty years since his divorce. He had lived alone with his books and his lessons for so long that he could barely remember that marriage. But he could picture his first wife weeping at the dinner table; he was sure that he must have said something to provoke it.

"I'll leave you alone," he said.

In the living room, Norbert and her father chatted about Governor Goebel, who had challenged the railroad companies and been killed for it. The two men were talking lightly, bantering.

"The day after I killed Governor Goebel, I sat on a railroad tie near Frankfort, waiting for a train to run me over, I felt so bad. But the trains never came that night. The L&N held them, from respect. They killed him, and then they held the trains."

"I bet you didn't have any more to do with that assassination than the man on the moon," Norbert said. "Tell me the truth."

"Truth, that's just a four-letter word, with another letter added on for bad luck."

They both laughed. Zanny ran her fingers over the busted latch on her mother's hope chest. Why couldn't she laugh at her father, the way Norbert did? Why couldn't Norbert take a joke from her? She tried to remember her mother. Zanny pictured sitting on her mother's lap while she peeled potatoes. Her father was standing nearby, and the two adults were talking about something, much too loudly. Zanny pressed her face into her mother's cotton dress. The memory didn't help her.

"Now you tell me the truth," her father said. "Those times on Mason Street, you said you were talking to Zanny about me, but you didn't ever talk to her once, did you?"

"Be quiet," Norbert said. "She might hear you."

"Look at you. You're scared as a sniveler."

Zanny knotted her thread and placed her sheets in her mother's chest. She started tapping her fingers against her mouth. After a few minutes of thinking, she told the men she needed to buy bacon. She slipped out and walked past the butcher on Ruskin Street until she reached Mason. There, she walked up to strangers, asked them if they had seen an old man in a conductor's hat. And had they ever noticed a heavyset, dark-haired man with horn-rimmed glasses who came to visit?

After she heard their answers, Zanny walked back to the apartment. She didn't bother to buy any bacon.

When she returned, her father and Norbert were drinking clear liquid from a bottle. They were enjoying a long discussion about all the dumb people who lived back in Hardin County, Kentucky.

"Don't forget Hook-and-Hammer Jeffcoat," Norbert said.

"He would've had the nicest prosthetic arm in the county, if he hadn't picked his nose so much," her father said.

She slammed the door behind her, to get their attention. They both struggled to sober up. Norbert handed the bottle to her father, and her father hid it under a couch cushion. That got them both laughing. Norbert's laughter, his talking, his meanness all seemed like a betrayal to Zanny. Maybe he wasn't as sensitive as he claimed.

"I don't think all the dummies got left behind in Hardin County," she said.

Norbert reached over and tapped her shoe with his fingers. "Hi, Zanny," he said.

"Do I look like a drum to you? Then stop tapping on my foot."

Norbert followed her into the bedroom. She walked to one side of the bed; when he came near, she walked to the other.

"Now, Zanny," he said.

"What are you going to do? Turn me in to the principal?"

In the living room her father was laughing. She walked past him, pulled the bottle from under the couch cushion, and poured his homebrew over the living room floor.

"Lick it up if you're so thirsty," she said. Norbert was standing

in the living room, rubbing a hand across his forehead. Her father drew a finger over the floorboards.

"This is sure going to be one sticky floor," he said.

Zanny lay flat on the bed, but then she thought too much. Her hands were trembling; she was neither happy nor sad. In the living room her husband groaned. She rolled over and lifted her sheets from her hope chest. But she was too agitated to sew. She sat there, fingering her sheets, thinking too much, then she began stuffing the sheet into her mouth. Just one corner, just enough to give her something to bite her teeth into.

A few minutes later Norbert came into the room. He sat down beside her.

"Tell me what I can do," he said. "Tell me how I can make you happy."

She touched his hand; she did not say anything.

"I'm going to take him home," he said. "I'm going to borrow a car from our landlord, and I'm going to drive him home tomorrow."

She spat the sheet from her mouth. The edges were dark, from her saliva.

The next day, while her husband drove her father home in the landlord's DeSoto Airflow, Zanny busied herself around the house. She scrubbed the soured liquor from the living room floor. She washed out the clear glass bottle and left it to dry on the counter. In the evening she worked again at her sheet. A few frayed strings dangled from the corner she had chewed, but otherwise there was no real damage. Much too early in the day, she fried a steak for Norbert. By the time he returned it was cold. Norbert wasn't in a mood to eat, anyway.

"He sat down in the garden, near the front porch," Norbert said. "The cornstalks had fallen over and dried out, and he lay down on top of them. His head was near your mother's gravestone and his feet were pointing toward the road. When the train passed, he waved his conductor's hat at the engine. But he didn't say a word."

Zanny was slicing the cold steak into strips and tossing those strips back into the frying pan. She turned on the tap and let the hot water clean the knife blade. Underneath them the men were banging away at the cars.

"Doesn't it bother you a little?" Norbert said. "Don't you care about him?"

"More than he cares about himself."

Norbert began planning outings for them. He had become friendly with the landlord and could borrow the DeSoto whenever he wanted. They drove to Cincinnati and Dayton. During the drives he told stories about Ohio history, stories that once would have interested Zanny. But now listening to him made her angry. He was talking at her, not to her. She bought new sets of sheets, more than she needed, and embroidered her initials onto the corners while Norbert drove. Still, sometimes it was too much.

"I don't care if General Dayton could shit gold," she said. "It's not going to make me any whiter."

"Zanny, I'm surprised at you."

"Maybe you should be."

Zanny wished Norbert wouldn't be so sensitive. She tried to be quiet, but sometimes she couldn't help herself.

"Is that coffee cup supposed to walk to the sink by itself?" she

said. Norbert turned away, grumbling words she couldn't hear. Then he carried the cup to the sink.

"Are you afraid of me?" she said.

"I face 120 teenagers a day at school," he said. "Why should I be afraid of you?"

"Why is just the letter that comes before Z. I'm asking if."

One weekend Norbert drove her south to Kentucky. They revisited Ashland, Henry Clay's home, where they had vacationed at the beginning of their courtship. They drove to Bardstown and looked at the old town jail. She felt nostalgic. When Norbert began apologizing to her for not making her happier, she placed her hand over his mouth. She could feel his lips moving on her palm.

After lunch they drove to the intersection of the state highway and Bardstown Road. Norbert pulled to the shoulder; they sat there a while, staring at the train tracks.

"Are you going to say something?" she said.

"I don't want to make you angry."

"You not saying it is making me angrier." Still he wouldn't ask. "Go ahead. Turn west. We're only a few minutes away."

She drummed her fingers against her lips. Why should she feel guilty? It wasn't her fault that her husband was so sensitive. Maybe it was being close to home, seeing Kentucky again. Maybe she was tired from the drive. She stuck her hand out the window and felt the warm rushing air.

They reached her father's house as a train approached. He was standing near the track, letting the train's wind wash over him. When the train passed he waved his hat. Then he walked over to them.

"You lost?" he said.

"Unfortunately," she said.

"Come get something to eat. Since you don't have anything good at home."

Zanny had always cooked for her father, but this time she sat down at the table. He chopped potatoes and fried bacon while he talked to Norbert.

"The kids getting any dumber?"

"Pretty soon, they'll be ready for Hardin County." They both laughed.

"That's not funny," she said.

"What's funny is your face," her father said. He put plates in front of them. Norbert wasn't eating; he was staring at her.

"Why can't I laugh?" Norbert said. "Why should I be in trouble for laughing?"

"Who's stopping you? What I want to know is why won't you talk? Speak. Answer me."

He didn't. Her father wiped his mouth with a napkin.

"He's dumber than a two-cent tack," her father said.

"And why can't you shut up?" she said.

She sat down in the garden, near her mother's headstone. She had forgotten how noisy silence was. There were tree leaves rustling and sparrows and a million crickets. A single engine chugged by on the tracks. It wasn't pulling any cars. A while later her husband came out to apologize. She stood near him, listening as long as she could. Then she grabbed his sleeves.

"Be angry," she said.

"Zanny, I'm not angry."

She ran upstairs to her old bedroom, where she pushed her

dresser and her desk against the door, barring it. Then she lay down on her girl's bed. The sheets hadn't been stripped since she ran away. Probably there were still pieces of her skin in this bed, flakes that she had shed when she was still unmarried. She pulled the sheets over her head.

She did not intend to stay, not at first. The idea of staying here, in the house she had escaped from, made no sense to her. All she meant to do was nap, by herself. But her husband pounded on the door, calling her name. He was worried; he was promising things would be better. Hearing him say that things were not good startled her. Now that it was said, she felt relieved. She began to giggle, although she did not know why. Then she pictured herself riding back to Ohio with Norbert. Once they were back home, he would want to pretend again. That was who he was. The thought choked her.

"Zanny," he said. "Do you want things different? Is the moon different from the sun? That's how different I'll be."

She turned toward the wall.

"Zanny? Please."

She placed the pillow over her ear.

Her husband did not hold out as long as she expected him to. She looked out the window; the DeSoto was gone. Downstairs her father was listening to the radio.

"Look who's awake," he said.

"I wasn't sleeping." She sat down on the sofa and stared out the window at the garden and the railroad tracks and her father's cornfields beyond. Her father left the room. Was he angry with her? No, in a few minutes he came back with a plate of pinto beans and ham.

"You're too good for potatoes," he said.

He sat down on his rocking chair and leaned forward to adjust the radio.

"You can always turn a set off when you're sick of it. Unlike a person."

"Turn it louder," she said. "That way I won't have to hear your jabber."

She passed her empty plate to him, and he carried it into the kitchen and washed it in the sink.

The railroad apartment was too loud for Norbert. All night their landlord was clanking away with his wrenches and jacking up cars. It was more than a man could take. It hadn't bothered Norbert so much, when he was not living alone. He was walking down Mason Street one day when he remembered that he still had the key to the old man's basement apartment. It was empty; the Hungarian landlord was scrubbing the floors. It was easy to negotiate the rent.

Norbert sold his furnishings to the garage owner. The hope chest he carried over to his new apartment. At first he meant to give it back to Zanny. Then he thought he would wait for her to write, asking for it. Then he decided to keep it. Sometimes he had foolish, sentimental thoughts about opening it up and looking at the initials she had sewn into the sheets. Every once in a while he kicked the chest, but not too hard.

Mostly, he used it as a chair. He would sit on it in the evenings after school. Sometimes he stared at the doorway, as if he were waiting for someone. Sometimes he stared at the textbook in his lap.

Between States

AFTER HER SISTER DIED, Peg Warren came back to Columbus, Kentucky, from a life spent filing memoranda for American diplomats in Kyoto and Milan and Washington, D.C. During her annual holiday visits, we used to see Peg and her sister holding the ladder in their fragile fingers as their great-nephew Franklin hung the Christmas lights. Peg wore, always, a green kimono with black trim, and a yellow-ribboned hat. Despite the cold, she did not shiver. If we took our children to the Old Town Hall Hotel to see the Christmas lights, she would teach our children to say thank you in Japanese and Italian and French, while her sister and her great-nephew Franklin passed out hard candies.

The last few months before her death, Peg's sister had gone soft. We caught her rapping on the boarded windows of the old town square, calling out "Hello" to the vacant counters, the empty racks.

Frankly, it was a relief when she died. We were supposed to talk to Franklin about her behavior, and none of us wanted to.

"What you going to do with that hotel now that your aunt's done gone?" we said at the viewing.

"Set a bomb to it, I guess," Franklin said. "Wait for it to fall down on its own, one or the other." Franklin is our high school basketball coach; early in the season he informs every boy of his limitations. You can't shoot; you can't dribble; you can't rebound. It is a startling, painful moment for our children, when they see the ceiling, when they learn the limits of their bodies. Of course, we admire Franklin more than we like him. Peg stood a few feet away, a black shawl across her kimonoed shoulders.

"Would you bomb a temple?" Peg said. "In Japan this hotel would be a shrine."

We backed away from the receiving line, sliding our fingers over our forearms. She had a teacherly coldness. She made us conscious of our limitations. "Have a safe trip back to Washington, D.C.," we said.

The square had been dead a long time, and so had the Old Town Hall Hotel, even if Peg and her sister didn't know it. Aside from a few nostalgic types, everyone stayed at the Best Western on the Knoxville Highway. Many nights, if we were cutting through the square, we'd see Peg's sister and Franklin sitting at the meeting table on the first floor. Above them, the great chandelier bellowed light out all four windows, over the Knoxville Highway and the Clarendon Pike, the two roads that met there and encircled the hotel like a snake over its prey. "What's that card game you two play all the time?" we asked Franklin.

"Cribbage," he said. "It's an old lady's game, but anything you can keep score in is alright by me." Franklin was a good basket-

ball coach, and a private, dutiful man. We clapped him on the shoulder.

Who among us could remember the old square? Before the division? Some of us claimed to, but we did not even convince ourselves. We remembered names. Hutchinson's Drugs, Cosgrove Cleaners, Edna's Big Dinners. It was a thing people said as they walked the mall on the Knoxville Highway. "Remember the old square?" A quick-answered yes, a nod, a silence as empty as the square itself. And then on to other things, the cheap food at the food court, the electronics for sale at the RadioShack.

The division was a different story. Everyone remembered that, or pretended to. There were so many stories to explain why they split the town in two, divvied it up between Kentucky and Tennessee. Some said a feud between the governors, or a long-lost map found in the archives in Nashville, or a nefarious plot by a displaced local postmaster, or a simple mistake buried in a congressional appropriation. In 1959, they lifted up the state line of Tennessee and laid it right down on the Knoxville Highway, cut the town in two. Columbus, Kentucky, and Columbus, Tennessee. Two new post offices, two new courthouses, two new high schools, built far away from the square. Peg's sister bought the courthouse for a song. For a long time, it was a nice hotel, even after the square started to die, but that was before the Tennessee side went wet, put in the Bennigan's and the Olive Garden with their bars, stole away the few people who bothered to come through here anyway.

Five days after the funeral, we saw Peg and Franklin playing cribbage under that chandelier. We circled the square an extra time,

just to be sure. She sat there in her sister's old chair, her yellow-ribboned hat nodding as she pegged her points.

"Last time we'll ever see her," we said. The idea did not make us sad.

In the spring and the summer, the kids from Columbus, Kentucky, High and Columbus, Tennessee, High met after school at the Old Town Hall Hotel for basketball scrimmages. Some idiot in Frankfort or Nashville forbade them to play each other in season, so they competed informally in the hotel basement once the season ended. We stood on the stairwell, spitting in our cups, watching our boys and girls insult each other.

"Maybe they call that defense in Kentucky."

"Get that Tennessee shit out of here."

It's all in fun, especially since the girls started playing, too, four years ago. Franklin and his best friend, Jess, who coaches the Tennessee team, squatted against the wall, blowing their whistles when the play got too rough. None of this meant anything, not the line they put in the middle of the town, or the new roads, or the new town halls. We were neighbors, making fun of each other.

"Goddamn, you Tennessee girls make some weak passes," we said.

During the season, Jess and Franklin gained weight, lost their hair, looked drawn and scared. The pressure cooked the life out of them. But in this basement, they were happy and free. We were happy for them, for the kids, for ourselves.

Ten days after the funeral, we saw Peg walking the Knoxville Highway. The wind twirled the sleeves of her kimono. She knelt down, ran her fingers over the sidewalk, where the old house numbers had

been chiseled so many years ago. When they cut the town in two, the postmasters gave all of us new numbers, which we painted on the front doors. The old ones on the sidewalk have been skimmed away by a thousand footsteps, sealed over by newly poured cement. But if you looked close, there were still the shallow cuts in the sidewalk.

"You lost?" we asked as we pulled over, rolled down our windows.

"Where are the Warings?" she said. "They live at 421."

"That isn't 421," we said, nodding at the painted numbers by the door. "That's 923." Peg grimaced, a sour, human face, and then she gracefully stepped into our car and pulled the door closed behind her.

"It used to be all the girls in town knew each other," she said. "It was like a sorority of us coming up from the South to work in the offices in the District. These days, if there's a girl in the office, she probably went to Harvard and wouldn't talk to us if we were on fire."

Or she talked Kyoto, or Milan: They had been beautiful towns when she first visited, but now they were ugly, awful places. "It used to be that you could sit in the gardens in Kyoto all day and watch the men rake the gravel, but now there's so many tourists around you can't even breathe."

At the hotel, we did not watch her walk up the steps. We dropped her off and sped away. Always, there was the sense that she was judging us, not kindly.

Where are the Warings? Or the Cosgroves? Or the Derryberrys? There is still a Hutchinson living off Knoxville Highway, an

old, sorrowful man who drives all the way to Johnson City for his drugs. When he's on Knoxville Highway, he turns one stoplight before he needs to, so he will not have to see the Eckerd they built by the Bennigan's.

At the basketball games, Peg stood next to her great-nephew, scowling at the players with an awful confusion. Sometimes she repeated the cusswords, the names, the hostility. "Bitch?" she said quietly. "Contreras? Rejection? Micah? Tennessee?" All of it puzzled her. When the Tennessee team won, she slid her hand under her kimono flap, rubbed her fingers over her stomach. "Oh," she groaned. "Oh me." Without looking up, Franklin reached out for her, and she leaned her face onto his palm and closed her eyes.

Her sister had never come to basketball games, not even at the end. We think that was wise. The old have swallowed their cup of pain. They do not need to be reminded they are alive.

She wandered farther from the hotel. In the morning, she was asleep on our front porch. She had painted over the number on our doorway, an ugly streak of green that did not match our trim. With the same paint, she wrote the word "Mitchells" on our first step. We are not the Mitchells. She had found the old chiseled numbers on the sidewalk and painted them silver. They looked like the claw marks left behind by a great predator, a metallic bird. We stood by the front door, listening to her snore. We snuck out through the kitchen. At the end of the school day, Franklin drove through the town, his whistle between his lips. He stopped at our house, but we said we had not seen her. We did not have time to talk. We were too busy repainting the numbers on our front door.

Without them, our house seemed fragile, ready to topple, unable to resist the first wind.

Where are the Mitchells? Among the well-trod paths in our mind, there is no sign of them, but they are there, underground, in the warren of things we pass over but do not often remember.

In the evenings, we drove to the post office and opened her letters, while our friend the postmaster took long, mournful hits from our bottle of rye. The return addresses on the envelopes were Kobe, Istanbul, Vienna. From the postman's stamp, we saw they were each mailed from the same office in Alexandria, Virginia. Her correspondents wrote at extraordinary length about people who live in Biloxi, Mississippi, and Fayetteville, Arkansas, and Lynchburg, Virginia. "Florence is as beautiful as ever," they wrote. "I kiss the Medici every morning for you." We did not understand what any of it meant.

In the letters, they asked about us, by name. They knew things about our past that we did not speak about in public. Adoptions, and trial separations, and fistfights that turned suddenly into felonies. They saw our sins from far away, like streetlamps seen from the window of an airplane.

"Someone needs to tell Franklin she's gone crazy," we said. None of us wanted to do it. We sealed the envelopes, snatched our bottle of rye from the postman, sulked our way home in the darkness.

Peg appeared at the courthouse in Kentucky, and also at the one in Tennessee. She asked for old property maps, from before the division. She copied them, name by name, onto paper she kept

folded in her purse. The desk clerks offered to Xerox them, but she preferred to write it herself.

"There are things I can't remember if I don't write them down," she said. "Do you know what that means? It means you're dying."

When we heard that, we slept soundly, innocent of our responsibilities.

At the basketball games, she behaved worse and worse. One time, when a Tennessee girl stole the ball, Peg shouted, "No!" and covered her face with her hands. We imagined her stepping forward, a boy striking her inadvertently, her bones smashing against the wall, her kimono fluttering helplessly around her. But she did not step onto the court. She moaned unintelligible, unhappy things. She painted more houses, inscribing names we could not remember. People who had disappeared long ago. She wrote her own name in front of the house where she grew up. It was our house. We washed her away with paint thinner. The next morning, she wrote it again.

"How pathetic," we said. We covered the sidewalk with cement, and she drew her name—and the names of the people who lived there prior to her—in the cement before it dried. Our houses were mausoleums, dedicated to dead people we could not remember. We cemented the sidewalk again and stood guard with dogs all night, to keep her away.

We saw our own name written in front of houses our grandparents once owned. Many of us had forgotten where they lived, or never even knew. Sometimes, one of us pulled to the side of the road, looked up at a house, at a number painted on the sidewalk, a list of names on the step.

"Where have they gone?" we said. Still, in groups, we talked eagerly about her thinning hands, her drooping eyes, her body disappearing in front of us.

The summer turned to fall. The teams played at their separate gymnasiums. They did not play each other. Franklin and Jess grew fatter; their hair grayed. There was idle talk that they had been seen in Johnson City, holding hands with girls just graduated from the high school, but we did not believe it. There are always bad things to be said about basketball coaches, in season.

"You thinking about taking her back to Washington?" we asked, nervously, after games. She wouldn't go, Franklin said. Looking over our shoulder, to be sure no one else could hear, Franklin whispered, "This morning, she started sweeping out the old courtroom. She said she had to clean it before the trial started. She begged me to drive her to school, so the teacher wouldn't spank her for being late." We clapped him on the shoulder. In the winter, she walked without a coat. Her kimono was stiff from the cold, and her fingers trembled over our names, our numbers. The letters were spidery, impossible to read. We were no longer the Mitchells. We were no longer even human. We were a scar on the sidewalk, a hieroglyph, a caveman's scratch upon the wall.

We scraped paint from our sidewalks. We snubbed the little Japanese restaurant that opened on the Knoxville Highway. When we went to Olive Garden, we ordered hamburgers instead of spaghetti. At times we felt free. Still, we would look at the sidewalk, at the ghosts' names visible there, under all that paint, all that cement.

The cold hardened; it became a stiff and living thing we had to fight through every morning. We left blankets on our porch, draped long

johns over the railing. At night we heard her chiseling through the ice. In the morning, when we kicked new snow from the sidewalk, we found crosses and unfamiliar initials carved underneath. The ground crunched under our boots as we walked to our cars.

At Christmas, Franklin climbed up the ladder to hang the lights over the doorway. We did not relish the hard candy, Peg's fingers on our children's cheeks. We decided we would not go, and none of us did.

Then, one blizzardy night we heard a new sound, an animal scratching at our door. We squinted at the curtains of snow, hissed out our windows. "Ain't no cat or dog getting me out in that mess," we said.

In the morning she lay stiff across our porch, her fingers shielding her mouth, her kimono tucked between her knees. The ribbon on her hat had frozen and snapped in two. We rubbed our fingers over her glassy cheeks, her hardened eyes. On our door, she had carved our old address in the ice. We kicked the door until it shuddered but we could not chip the ice away. "She wasn't asking to come in," we said. "She wouldn't have come in even if we let her."

For visitation, Franklin opened the town hall one last time. Since she had never married, the funeral home director, without thinking, laid Peg out in a white dress. Franklin groaned when he saw her. For his sake, we lifted her rigid body, cut the dress with shears, and slid her ungiving fingers through the sleeves of her kimono. We buried her in the family plot, on the Kentucky side of the line. The condolence letters from her friends claimed to be from Italy and Kenya and Singapore. Glumly, out of duty, we opened them. They were addressed to all of us; they tried to give us comfort for

our loss. They described the beauty of the world, its oddities and illuminations. We could not bear to read them. On every one, the same postman's stamp: "Alexandria, Virginia."

The old town hall still stands. If Franklin ever goes there, we do not know it. In the spring, the teams scrimmage outdoors at the park by the new lake off Knoxville Highway. When Franklin and Jess blow their whistles, the sound evaporates into the clouds, along with the insults and the squeaking shoes and everything else that matters.

Where is Peg? After the scrimmages, if Franklin is left alone for a moment, he asks us that question. He asks it again and again, until Jess come over, leads him by the arm to his car, takes the bottle from his hands. "Where is Peg?" Franklin asks. Most nights, Jess drives him home.

Whenever we can, we take the bypass around town, so we do not have to see that hotel. Boarded up and unloved, it sits at the center of our old town, the one we no longer inhabit.

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THE FLANNERY O'CONNOR AWARD
FOR SHORT FICTION

David Walton, *Evening Out*
Leigh Allison Wilson, *From the Bottom Up*
Sandra Thompson, *Close-Ups*
Susan Neville, *The Invention of Flight*
Mary Hood, *How Far She Went*
François Camoin, *Why Men Are Afraid of Women*
Molly Giles, *Rough Translations*
Daniel Curley, *Living with Snakes*
Peter Meinke, *The Piano Tuner*
Tony Ardizzone, *The Evening News*
Salvatore La Puma, *The Boys of Bensonhurst*
Melissa Pritchard, *Spirit Seizures*
Philip F. Deaver, *Silent Retreats*
Gail Galloway Adams, *The Purchase of Order*
Carole L. Glickfeld, *Useful Gifts*
Antonya Nelson, *The Expendables*
Nancy Zafris, *The People I Know*
Debra Monroe, *The Source of Trouble*
Robert H. Abel, *Ghost Traps*
T. M. McNally, *Low Flying Aircraft*
Alfred DePew, *The Melancholy of Departure*
Dennis Hathaway, *The Consequences of Desire*
Rita Ciresi, *Mother Rocket*
Dianne Nelson, *A Brief History of Male Nudes in America*
Christopher McIlroy, *All My Relations*
Alyce Miller, *The Nature of Longing*

Carol Lee Lorenzo, *Nervous Dancer*

C. M. Mayo, *Sky over El Nido*

Wendy Brenner, *Large Animals in Everyday Life*

Paul Rawlins, *No Lie Like Love*

Harvey Grossinger, *The Quarry*

Ha Jin, *Under the Red Flag*

Andy Plattner, *Winter Money*

Frank Soos, *Unified Field Theory*

Mary Clyde, *Survival Rates*

Hester Kaplan, *The Edge of Marriage*

Darrell Spencer, *CAUTION Men in Trees*

Robert Anderson, *Ice Age*

Bill Roorbach, *Big Bend*

Dana Johnson, *Break Any Woman Down*

Gina Ochsner, *The Necessary Grace to Fall*

Kellie Wells, *Compression Scars*

Eric Shade, *Eyesores*

Catherine Brady, *Curled in the Bed of Love*

Ed Allen, *Ate It Anyway*

Gary Fincke, *Sorry I Worried You*

Barbara Sutton, *The Send-Away Girl*

David Crouse, *Copy Cats*

Randy F. Nelson, *The Imaginary Lives of Mechanical Men*

Greg Downs, *Spit Baths*